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allegiances

[image]

ZephyrClan

leader.

Aspenstar
amber spotted tabby she-cat with short, bushy fur and hazel eyes.

deputy.

Smallbush
small, black tom with medium-long, messy fur and amber eyes.

medicine cat.

Fallowbark
short furred light brown tabby calico she-cat with orange eyes

apprentice, Sequoiapaw

warriors.

Bluefall
blue-gray dappled tabby tom with orange eyes

Ryefoot
mostly brown tabby tortoiseshell she-cat with amber eyes

Roseslip
broad lilac she-cat with green eyes.

Tansyflame
russet spotted tabby tom with yellow-green eyes

apprentice, Birchpaw

Peachhop
cream ticked tabby tom with golden eyes

Tulipleap
ginger tabby tom with yellow eyes

Camphorwind
gray tabby point tom with blue eyes

Blizzardstream
large white tom with green eyes

Aldermist
pretty gray tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Hemlockwish
white she-cat with blue eyes

Almonddusk
brown tabby she-cat with hazel eyes

Camelliaheart
red tabby and white tom, lazy amber eyes

Pochardpounce
black and white cat with green eyes

Honeywing

calico she-cat with yellow eyes

Balsamfur
black she-cat with yellow eyes

apprentices.

Sequoiapaw
ginger tabby tom with green eyes

Birchpaw
dilute tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

queens.

Agaveshade
gray tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow eyes. mother to Tulipleap's kits

Pecanwhisker
red-brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes. mother to Camphorwind's kits

kits.

Poplarkit
Agaveshade's son. gray tabby tom with yellow eyes

Peonykit
Agaveshade's daughter. dilute tortoiseshell she-kit with deep amber eyes

Sagekit
Agaveshade's son. gray tabby tom with green eyes

Acaciakit
Pecanwhisker's daughter. light brown she-cat with darker sable points and blue eyes

Catalpakit
Pecanwhisker's son. gray tabby point tom with blue eyes

elders.

Cedarface
a once-handsome amber tom with yellow eyes

StarClan

Cottonkit
white tom-kit with yellow-green eyes

Hollydapple
black smoke she-cat with yellow eyes, a former queen

Finchthorn
calico she-cat with green eyes, a former deputy

Morningleaf
ginger point tom with blue eyes, a former medicine cat

Pistachiopaw
light cinnamon spotted tabby tom with green eyes. tasked with watching over sequoiapaw.

Chaffinchstar
tabby tortoiseshell cat, former leader of zephyrclan

introduction

[image]

introduction

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Content Warning :

Dark themes discussed including death, suicide, mental abuse from partner.

This fic came to me in the middle of the night in late February 2020. I started outlining it the next day, and I quickly became attached to the characters and the story. I didn't actually post it until now, April 12, 2020, after I finished a different fic I had been working on (Stars Lied).

I'm really excited to write this, hopefully it's as cute and heart warming and gut wrenching as I'm hoping it to be. It's more of a slice of life type story that's telling these character's lives aaanddd yeah.

I'm not known as an "aesthetic" account, but I do really like the look

of those "aesthetic" fics. I think they look really nice and organized, which I think suits this fic since it is one of my more organized and planned ones. I did take a bit of inspiration from those style fics, in terms of the layout of this book.

Anyway.

Yeah.

Enjoy!!

-Tea

character aesthetics

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if you would like to add your own aesthetic for The Weight of Living, dm me

by me

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prologue | a mother's woe

[image]

prologue
a mother's woe

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"Great job, Aldermist, great job! The kit's out!" A mottled tabby medicine cat ran her tongue over a white-furred bundle at the new mother's side. The gray tabby queen panted heavily, the heat of her exhaustion and her breath warming the den. She picked her head up, warm sunset-colored eyes full of worry.

"Why isn't he meowing?" She whispered.

"He's just taking his time...," the tortoiseshell-furred medicine cat murmured between licks.

"I got the fennel like you asked, Fallowbark! It took me a while to find it— oh, you already had the first one!" A young, wide eyed tom bounded in, bringing with him the cool of the night air. He dropped the bundle of green in his jaws as he arrived at the kitting queen's side.

"There's only one kit, Sequoiapaw," Aldermist informed, letting her head rest. "...But he's not crying yet! Pecanwhisker's kits all meowed when they were born...!" She looked to the reddish brown tabby laying in a nest near the left with her two kits were nestled at her side, still too young to do anymore than whine and eat. After a few moments the ginger and brown mottled medicine cat looked up, her

eyes wide and yet seemingly lost. "Fallowbark...? What's wrong with my kit?"

"He... he's dead."

Silence filled the den, only interrupted by the hungry mewling of Pecanwhisker's kits, and the chirping of crickets outside. Wind whistled at the tall grasses that wove together to form the den, but could not break through to chill the mothers inside. Aldermist let out a shaky breath, her eyes shutting tight before a low wail escaped her mouth. Fallowbark backed up, raising her tail for Sequoiapaw to leave.

"I'll... go get Blizzardstream," the mottled calico medicine cat fled from the den. Aldermist shakily pulled the limp white kitten close to her belly with shaky sobs. She sniffled, gingerly grooming his fur clean and dry.

"Momma, why is Aldermist crying...? She woke me up--." The last queen in the den, Agaveshade, pressed her muzzle into the fur of her gray tabby son.

"Hush, Poplarkit. Go back to sleep," she wrapped her tail tightly around her three kits, silently pleading StarClan would not take them from her like the misfortune that had befallen her denmate.

Aldermist continued to groom her son, urging him to come back to life. *StarClan, please. Please, just breathe into him and give him life. Please, he's my only child, please!* A much louder cry escaped her, and she pushed her nose into her snowy white son's fur.

"Please...!" Her voice quivered. Pawsteps sounded as a heavy pawed cat hurried over the flattened grass and into the den. The tom took up much of entrance, blocking out the moonlight that had flooded in. The soft night light outlined the white furred, well muscled frame.

"Aldermist, Aldermist, it's okay. It's okay," he came to the woeful queen's side, curling up around her and giving her comforting licks.

"It's not fair. StarClan just... took him. Before he could even take a

breath, they took him from me. Our son, our little warrior," she turned her head to rest on her mate. His eyes hardened with pain as they fell upon his child, a vivid reflection of himself.

"I know. I bet... they need him. They need our son for something important." She was quiet, but every once and a while, her body would shiver with a sob.

"I loved him before he was born, and it hurts so much to not be able to get to know him. Him...," her eyes looked upon the soft white tom with love and pain, "... my little... Cottonkit."

one | breath

[image]

one
breath

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"Cottonkit... Cottonkit!" Soft, warm light flooded Cottonkit's vision as he cracked open his eyes. Grasses tickled his nose from where he lay, tucked safely in a feather and moss nest. He picked his head up to see who had called him, and let out a small mew of hello as he recognized the dark form enter his den. Hollydapple. The charcoal she-cat entered the small bush that he called home, laying down next to him. She brought with her a sweet scent and a soft light seemed to glow from her. Her tongue rasped over his snowy fur, fixing it straight. "It's time to wake up, little one."

"G'morning, Hollydapple...!" the tiny tom let out a large yawn, his body shaking with the effort. His own pelt emit a slight glow, and speckles of white light were caught in his fur. The older she-cat had been looking after him since he could remember, but once his eyes had opened she had been sure to tell him she was not his mother. *And that Mother is very far away. She's stuck in the Below!* Cottonkit sighed and picked his head up to look at Hollydapple's face. He blinked brightly, his eyes still a newborn kit blue, and not yet developed into his grown eye color.

"You know, in the Below, my kits never let me groom their fur,

they always complained!" Hollydapple reminisced. Cottonkit purred and leaned into the she-cat as she groomed him.

"I like it though! ...Hey, how many kits did you have in the Below? Why don't they come and see me like you come see me?" He fired off questions and she waved her feathery tail.

"Now, I've told you, Cottonkit. Cats who live in the Below can't see or talk to us here in StarClan. They have to live there until one day when they get to come to StarClan."

"When's that day? I wanna meet your kits; I haven't met any other kits!"

"You haven't met any other kits because you've been too young! Besides, my kits are apprentices now, so they're too big to play with you," she gave him a lick behind the ears and she gave him a thoughtful look. "I think you're old enough now, though! Today's the day when they give you your special job." His ears pricked at this, and his short tail flicked with happiness.

"Really?!" He stood up shakily, his legs still too young to properly propel him.

Hollydapple nodded warmly, her green eyes closing as she did.

"Mmhmm! Chaffinchstar decided what your special job will be this morning." Hollydapple stood up.

"Your special job is to look after me, right?" The dark she-cat nodded, padding slowly alongside the tom kit as the exited the bush den. Tall, lush golden grass met them, dotted with white flowers and glowing with stardust. A clear trail led away from the grass den, parting the flowery field. The sun wasn't exactly present, but the warm feeling and a soft, welcoming daylight took it's place. The sky still shown with stars along the peachy colored backdrop.

"You'll get an extra special job, too."

"Since I left the Below *reeeallly* early, right?" He grinned worth satisfaction that he knew the right answer, and Hollydapple gave a nod again though it was accompanied by a solemn expression.

"Yeah, right." Cottonkit purred and stepped quickly to keep up with the queen. His eyes wondered to the field around him, which opened up to a vast expanse of hills dotted with copses of trees and bushes. The white tom slowed down in awe; this was the first time he had ventured further than just outside of the den. He could see cats in the distance running and playing, some were even chasing down rabbits. Their fur, like his, was glowing ever so slightly and filled with stardust. Some had fur glowing with a pinkish light, while others had a cheerful green. Others were a neutral white, and he noticed white that was a faint blue. He continued on, his nose was filled with rich scents of prey and cats.

"Wow, Hollydapple! Wow, wow!" He jumped with excitement, and she purred. It was then that he noticed her own aura was tinged faintly with a bright grassy green. "Why are some light's different colors?" He looked over to two cats passing with slight rose quartz colored light emitting from them, white stardust flying behind them in their wake.

"It can tell you how a cat is feeling. Usually you'll see a white light, but when they're feeling a particular way, it'll change colors. You're glowing a little green, Cottonkit!" His eyes widened as he noticed a faint green light trailing behind him.

"I never noticed!" He gaped, and she laughed.

"Come on, Chaffinchstar is just up by the creek."

The pair continued on, but he couldn't shake the feeling of other cats watching him. As he glanced around, he noticed, yes. A few somber glances met him as they noticed his presence, and even one's aura gained a faint blue glow as they looked away.

"Hollydapple... why do they look at me like that...?" He whispered, but she nudged the young tom along.

"Don't worry. Here, look! The creek, and there's Chaffinchstar!" Cottonkit's eyes lit up as his eyes fell upon a tortoiseshell tabby she-cat sitting proudly under a tamarack tree by the water's edge. A creamy white tom with a ginger face and paws sat next to the she-cat along with a young, light reddish brown, spotted tabby tom.

Their faces lit up as they saw the two approach, their own faint white starry auras glowing in their fur.

"Cottonkit! I've heard all about you." The white and ginger tom purred, lowing his head. "I'm Morningleaf."

"Yeah, and I'm Pistachiopaw!" The light cinnamon tom stepped forward proudly, a gleam in his eyes. Chaffinchstar raised her tail, giving the apprentice a side-eye of annoyance. He backed down apolitically, but a glow of confidence still warmed his eyes.

Cottonkit looked between the three cats, eyes wide with a bit of a panic. He had never really been so close to any other cats, he had only known Hollydapple his whole life. The dark she-cat nudged him gently, and he glanced up to look her in the eyes. She was warm and reassuring, and he timidly smiled to the new faces.

"Well, I'm sure Hollydapple has told you that you're going to be getting an extra special job," Chaffinchstar sighed and swished her tail. Cottonkit gave a meek nod from where he stood close to Hollydapple. "Your job," Chaffinchstar stepped toward the creek's edge, waving her tail for the kit to come closer. "Is important. We need you to watch over a kit from the Below." He stepped close, eyes wide with interest.

The leader touched her paw to the surface of the crystal clear water, and in the ripples an image formed. A kit, not younger nor older than himself. They had creamy fur tinged with brown begging to show around their nose, paws, ears, and tail. Their eyes were also a bright kit-blue, though they held an indignant confidence to them. Cottonkit glanced up to the ginger and brown mottled tabby. "This is Acaciakit. She would've been your dentate if you hadn't left the Below so early, and we know she'll need your guidance one day," the leader took a step back as Cottonkit let his eyes fall back down to the image in the water, just as it started to fade.

"I can do that...!" He purred.

"Good. I'm happy you accept; it's an important job. Pistachiopaw came to StarClan as a kit as well, so he's been watching over ZephyrClan's medicine cat apprentice."

"ZephyrClan? Medicine Cat...?" Cottonkit tipped his head to the side, one ear twitching with interest and confusion. Pistachiopaw grinned broadly.

"ZephyrClan, one of the Clans from the Below! Jeez, Cottonkit, there's a lot you don't know, huh?" the pale red-brown tom strut dramatically toward the small kit.

"Pistachiopaw, he's just a kit! You had to be taught everything you know, too, when you got here," Morningleaf groaned, and the spotted apprentice paused to look back. Chaffinchstar started away, flicking her thin tail behind her.

"I'll be off then, I've done my part," she murmured to the ginger-faced Morningleaf as she passed. The tom nodded softly. Cottonkit gazed back down into the water, which reflected the sky above. As he squinted though, he could see past the reflection, and see the stones below. He squinted even more, and further he could feel a chilling breeze as he could make out... a camp?

"Can you see ZephyrClan?" Pistachiopaw murmured. Cottonkit jumped, not realizing the tom had come up to join him at his side.

"Is that what that is? I can see... an area walled by bushes. It's in a valley... but it isn't all warm and starry like it is here. It chilly, and... dull." Pistachiopaw laughed with a full belly laugh, and Hollydapple purred a smile as well.

"Yeah, it's pretty dull in the Below. They don't have auras or stars. They have blue skies, and get this: a circle of light in the sky called 'the Sun!' Crazy, right?" Cottonkit nodded in agreement, focusing his attention to squint down to see the image in the magic waters. However, the view was the same: much too high up to see any details. He could only make out the forms of cats. "You can't see much more than that from here. We'll have to go to the Pool of the Below to go down and be with them." Cottonkit felt his chest lighten with excitement.

"We can go to the Below? We can visit them?! I want to see Mother; Hollydapple says Mother is down there! Oh, Pistachiopaw, have you met my mother? What's she like?!" Cottonkit bounced on

his toes. The cinnamon tom paused, and the first indication of hesitancy was visible from the tom.

"Why don't we go back and rest, Cottonkit? You've had a long journey coming all the way out here. Tomorrow, you can go with Pistachiopaw to visit ZephyrClan in the Below, and get all the answers you want. How does that sound?" Cottonkit let out a large yawn, and nodded.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then, Pistachiopaw!" Cottonkit ducked behind Hollydapple as they parted ways, and the apprentice gave a big, cheesy grin in response.

The trek back to the grass den was just as bright and exciting as when they had left. The fields were beautifully glistening with starlight, and cats still chased and played. Cottonkit watched with interest as they passed by, Hollydapple scooping him up at one point to carry him the rest of the way back.

Acaciakit, huh? She's a kit, just like me...! We'll be the best of friends, I'll make sure of it!

//
an

fun fact: Siamese cats are born all white! Little Acaciakit will grow into her markings :—)

I hope you enjoyed this part!! I wanted to flesh out StarClan a bit more than what it is in the books, so cats emit a bit of an aura. Usually it's white with stars, but it can be tinged with color based on strong emotions. Green is happy, blue is sad, etc. Lowkey basing colors off of the Sims 4 mood colors haha.

-tea

two | the below

[image]

two
the below

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Cottonkit woke up before Hollydapple had arrived for the morning. She had stopped sleeping in his den once he had been able to stand and move, but she hadn't ceased to visit him daily. The second his eyes flashed open, he was out of his nest, bounding out of the den. The sky was streaked with a mid red violet hue as it transitioned from the deep purples of night to the light peachy shade of day. *I get to visit the Below today...! I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to do for Acaciakit, but I'm excited to see my mother. I bet I'll meet my father, too!* Cottonkit hummer happily as he looked out over the fields of flowers and stars.

"You're up early, Cottonkit." The young tom looked over his shoulder as Hollydapple approached. The slim queen had medium long fur, which gave a subtleness to her features for an overall appearance of gentle beauty.

"Yeah, I wanted to get a head start on today! I can't wait to go with Pistachiopaw to the... Water of Below? What was it called again...?"

"The Pool of the Below," she meowed, lowing her head to groom his sleep-tussled fur. He leaned in with a purr.

"Oh right! The Pool of the Below! I'm going to meet Acaciakit, and my mother, and my father, and the rest of ZephyrClan! Maybe Acaciakit has siblings that I can play with?" He turned his head to look to Hollydapple but she simply straightened a stray tuft of fur

on his back.

"You won't be able to really play with them...," she meowed after a few moments had passed. He blinked with shock, but she gave him a gentle nudge as she was satisfied with his fur. "You'll know more when you get there. Let's get going, I'm sure Pistachiopaw is ready to go visit the cat he watches over."

Cottonkit was quiet as they made their way along the trail. *I won't be able to play with Acaciakit? How am I supposed to be her friend? Hollydapple said that friends are cats that you have fun with!* They passed the willow that they had first met Chaffinchstar the day before, but Hollydapple led him along past it. They followed alongside the stream's edge until it broke off to the left, and they then followed that trail.

Slowly, the terrain turned from endless grassy fields to birch trees and ferns. Stardust and thin veils of smoky fog rolled along the earth, and Cottonkit clung to Hollydapple's side with apprehension. The woods were darker than the open fields, as the full, blue-green tree leaves blocked out part of the peachy light. The trees broke up suddenly though into a wide open clearing, and the stream filled out into one large pool. The white kit halted sharply, eyes going wide as he took in the scene before him. A massive, semi-opaque, shard of stone sat in the center of the pool. The white crystal stood taller than he could jump, and a pale lavender light shone from it. A strange coolness rolled around the glade, and was a sharp contrast to StarClan's typical comfortable warmth.

Pistachiopaw was already waiting, his starry red-brown fur bathed in the lavender light. He turned to greet the two with a cocky grin.

"Good morning!" The tom purred from where he sat at the pool's edge. Cottonkit was frozen to Hollydapple's side, his head low as he took in the scene. The apprentice stood, fluffing out his fur. "I know, it's a lot, isn't it? Well, c'mon! Let's go!" He flicked his tail, and Hollydapple gave him a gentle nudge. He felt a strong hesitation in his paws, and all of the morning's excitement seemed to drain and left him alone to the raw feeling of uneasiness. "It's okay, don't worry," Pistachiopaw neared and crouched down. "I'll be with you the whole time."

"...What about Hollydapple...? Is she coming?" He looked up the queen, but she shook her head solemnly.

"Chaffinchstar wants me to come see her. Pistachiopaw will take care of you, though. Go on, go meet Acaciakit!" He felt an air of confidence from her and gave a stiff nod, his small pink pawpads stepping forward toward the pool. The starry water was shallow, and the bottom was covered in smooth, semi-opaque crystals of varying pastels. He set paw into the still water, and was met with a calm coolness. Ripples echoed in the wake of his movement, but faded as quickly as they appeared. The stones were soft on his pads, and had a strange slight warmth to them. Pistachiopaw was at his side, wading further past him. The water came up to his shoulders as he crept up to Pistachiopaw's side, but slowly as he waded further, the water level crept higher. He paused as he felt the stone flooring start to drop off steeper toward the center. Pistachiopaw, a few steps ahead, looked back, the water up to his shoulder blades.

"Dive under the water. That's how you get to the Below!" His teeth glinted with the pale blue-purple hue of the center quartz as he flashed a grin. Cottonkit felt his heart hammer in his chest, his paws urging him to turn tail and run. He looked back to see Hollydapple at the edge of the water several tail lengths away. She dipped her head encouragingly, and the small kitten took a deep breath and pushed his head underwater.

For a second, his vision was bright, only seeing a starry lavender glow. He blinked heavily, and his eyes adjusted to a bright spot of blinding light blearily breaking through a haze of water. He felt teeth on his scruff, and was pulled up from underwater.

"Cottonkit! C'mon, you can't just stay underwater!" Pistachiopaw grinned as he stood next to him in a pond of water. The small tom looked around, but realized things were... different. An uncomfortable chill whisked past him, and a far-to-bright disc hung in a bright blue sky.

"Where... are we?" He whispered as he took it in. This pool had a muck as the flooring, and was void of crystals, rolling fogs, and starlight. Wind pushed waves at the surface, and he jumped as he saw the flash of a scaly creature swimming not too far from him.

"Welcome to the Below!" Pistachiopaw purred, making his way out of the pond. They were only a tail length from the grassy shore. Cottonkit splashed after him, but was curious to not that he didn't stir the water at all. He hummed with interest, and tailed after the heavy apprentice.

It was much more different from StarClan. The Below did not have a perfect temperature nor a breathtaking sights and colors. Rather, the sky was a gray-ash blue, and had thick swaths of dark clouds gathered. Trees dotted the horizon, but as they pad through the green grassed hillsides, the young kit noted that here, the trees had dark, emerald colored leaves rather than StarClan's light blue-green color. He quickly caught up to Pistachiopaw as he got too far ahead.

"Where's Acaciakit?" He murmured, but cut himself off as they crested the ridge of a hill which overlooked a bush-walled camp. Thick swaths of bushes and sharp looking brambles encased the area, but the protective barrier grew too high to see into it.

"She's in there! ZephyrClan keep their kits inside camp at all times because in the Below, there are creatures that will steal kits!" Pistachiopaw remarked, making Cottonkit jump with fear.

"Creatures that *steal* kits?!" His voice quivered, but the reddish brown tabby flicked his tail simply.

"No need to worry, they won't steal you. C'mon!" He led the way down toward the camp, leaving a slight trail of his white aura and stars behind him. Cottonkit bounded after him, feeling his chest lighten with excitement. "I watch over the medicine cat apprentice, Sequoiapaw! He's not too much of a pawful, but he needed a lot of divine inspiration to commit herbs to memory." *Hm. 'Herbs.' I wonder if Acaciapaw will need help to remember herbs, too! I... wonder what* herbs *are.* As they neared the camp, an overwhelming scent of cat began to hang in the air. It was a light scent of wind, rabbit, and grass.

His tail swished back and forth happily as he saw a ZephyrClan cat sitting outside of the camp. *A warrior! Hollydapple said she used to be a warrior!* Pistachiopaw led the way past the pale ginger tom.

"That's Peachhop!" the apprentice noted as the passed him. The golden eyed tom didn't seem to notice the starry pair, to which Cottonkit gaped in awe.

"He's protecting the camp, but he didn't even notice us...!" He whispered. Pistachiopaw flicked an ear.

"Yeah, that's the thing...," the camp opened up before them. The ground was ever so slightly raised, so that it didn't flood in rain. The hull of long-ago fallen tree lay across much of the camp, with a ledge where a lost branch stuck out particularly far. Large dens were built of bushes, brambles, and grass to house the cats, and a wall was formed along concave inside of the tree for a sharp plant-scented den. A cat scurried across the camp carrying brush as building supplies, and a few others were talking to a particularly small black tom that held a particular air of importance. Cottonkit went to cautiously step close to Pistachiopaw, but the tom was already making his way toward the den built into the hull of the tree. The small tom scurried after him with a huff. The apprentice paused. "Oh! You should probably go meet Acaciakit; you wouldn't want to hang out in the medicine den. It's boring." The tom nosed in the direction of a den with a veil of honeysuckle. "That's the nursery."

Cottonkit nodded and slowly turned, feeling absolutely tiny in the open camp. He opened his mouth to ask a question, but Pistachiopaw was already disappearing into the bushes of the medicine den. He slowly made his way across to where the den sat, a thick layer of brush protecting it. A sweet scent welcomed him, and he paused briefly as he felt a wave of an unpleasant emotion. He glanced over his shoulder to see two cats in the shadows of the bushes by the camp's entrance. One was a particularly pretty gray tabby, the other a massive white tom. He blinked and quickly bounded toward the nursery. Before he could make it in, though, a gust of air swept past him. He swiveled on his paw, avoiding a bundle of kits bursting out of the den.

"Poplarkit, you cheated! You stepped on my tail!" He heard the indignant yowl of one. His eyes grew wide as he recognized this kit: creamy fur with the beginnings of chocolate markings forming around the nose, paws, tail, and ears.

Acaciakit.

"I'll show you justice, you cheater!" She bared her teeth and waggled her haunches to leap at the much larger gray tabby.

"Acaciakit, you know warriors don't always serve justice with their claws," a figure stepped out of the nursery, halting the tiny kit's onslaught. A lovely red brown she-cat with darker brown tabby stripes seemingly drizzled on her pelt stepped out. At her side was a white tom kit the same age as Acaciakit, with a similar beginning of markings on his muzzle, paws, and tail, though his marks were gray rather than brown. Cottonkit assumed him to be her brother.

"He cheated, though."

Poplarkit whined and jumped forward angrily. "I did not cheat! Why would I cheat a kit who's two moons younger than me?"

"Liars and cheaters don't go to StarClan, that's what Sequoiapaw said," she turned her head away, eyes closed.

"Acaciakit, you can't say that!" The red-brown tabby scolded. "Perhaps he stepped on your tail on accident?" The tabby nodded profusely, but Acaciakit wasn't satisfied.

The she-kit opened her mouth indignantly and swung her head up to her mother but paused as her eyes swept past where Cottonkit stood in awe. She narrowed her eyes and looked around in confusion. Cottonkit, though, was frozen. His chest felt warmed but yet chilled at the same time. His heart raced with exhilaration, and his tail twitched with excitement. *I feel... something strange! A connection?!*

"Can we just play Pecanwhisker's game already?" Poplarkit whined. The white and brown she-kit blinked and looked away. *But... she didn't really see me. It was like she looked right through me!*

"Yeah, let's play!" Acaciakit's brother purred at Pecanwhisker's side.

"I'll play!" Cottonkit piped up, taking a step forward. Pecanwhisker leaned down and licked the top of her gray and white son's head. *Does she have poor hearing or sight? Maybe the cats from the Below*

don't have very good senses?

"Alright, Catalpakit, but we should wait for Poplarkit's siblings to come out," the two point kits' mother sat down with a smile as she looked down at her children.

Cottonkit tipped his head and took a step forward.

"I'll play!" He repeated, but yet again he didn't garner any reaction. *They aren't even looking at me...! I don't think... they can see me... or hear me... or anything at all!* Cottonkit backed up slowly, his throat drying and ears pinning back. "I want to go back! I want to go back! Pistachiopaw, take me back!" He turned tail, haring off toward the medicine den. The stocky tom took a step out of the bushes just as the white kit arrived, the apprentice having a blank look on his face.

"What's wrong, Cottonkit?" He meowed, tipping his head to the side. Cottonkit shook his head.

"They can't see me! They can't hear me!" Cottonkit wailed; it was the loudest he had ever spoken. "I can't be friends with Acaciakit, she doesn't know I'm here!" Pistachiopaw hummed and sat down.

"Hey, it's okay. You can still help Acaciakit even if she can't see you or hear you. You wanna know how I help Sequoiapaw?" He ducked his head, green eyes flashing. Cottonkit blinked away the anguish as his interest was piqued. He gave the slightest of nods, eyes wide. "I can impress emotions on him! You shouldn't do it a lot, but if Sequoiapaw is feeling really anxious or really distracted, I can make him feel calm or focused."

Cottonkit looked over his shoulder to where Acaciakit was chasing after Poplarkit.

"Does he know it's you though?"

The apprentice sighed and shook his head.

"No, but I'm okay with that. I know I'm helping him, so it makes me happy. I'm happy seeing him succeed." Pistachiopaw looked back toward the medicine den with a soft smile. Cottonkit felt his heart

lift and his tail swished back and forth.

"Wow, Pistachiopaw... you're so cool!" He chirped. The cinnamon spotted tom laughed and grinned.

"You bet I am! How about we go back home?" The kit shook his head.

"No, I want to meet my Mother first! Do you know who my Mother is?" Pistachiopaw hummed and nodded. His raised his muzzle, looking to the camp's entrance.

"Yeah. Her name is Aldermist," the pair walked forward toward where two cats sat by the bush open ring. *I saw them earlier, but I didn't think she was my mom! She's pretty...!* Cottonkit purred as his eyes fell on the downy gray tabby. "That's your dad, Blizzardstream, too." He pointed his tawny nose toward the thick, broad white tom at his mother's side. Cottonkit took a step forward, but he felt an overwhelming feeling radiating from the she-cat. It made his heart feel almost empty, and he stepped closer to Pistachiopaw for comfort.

"Pistachiopaw, why does Aldermist feel so... sad?"

"In StarClan, you can see a cat's emotions by their aura. In the Below, you feel their emotions roll off of them. Aldermist is sad because she misses you," he explained quietly. Cottonkit tipped his head to the side.

"I'm right here though. I wish she knew that." The older tom nodded in agreement.

"Let's head back."

"I can't wait to tell Hollydapple about Acaciakit and Aldermist and Blizzardstream. Maybe she'll know how to make Aldermist feel better about missing me," the snowy kit meowed thoughtfully, and they head out of the camp. He took one last glance at Acaciakit as she pinned her brother Catalpakit to the ground with a determined look. *I'll see you soon, Acaciakit. I'm going to learn all I can from Pistachiopaw about how to be a good protector for you!* He gave a

kindful smile and dashed after the fast-paced apprentice as they head back to the pond they had come from.

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that's chapter two!! It's pretty long, I know. The rest of the chapters probably won't be this long, but we had a lot of content for this one! Chapters from here on out will be spaced out more in time, especially since I don't like to dawdle on kithood lmao

I hope you like pistachio-senpai haha I Lowkey ship him with sequoiapaw but shhhhh.

three | takeoff

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three
takeoff

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Cottonkit sighed deeply. Cold winds gusted at ZephyrClan's camp, chilling him to his core. It had been a moon since he first set paw in the Below, and he had been upset to find out the weather here got *colder* as time moved on. Hollydapple assured him it would eventually get hotter, to the point he'd wish it was cold again. *Maybe I should ask Pistachiopaw if he's ready to go back to StarClan. It's always balmy there. And besides...* His eyes, which had changed from kit-blue to a soft leafy green, fell upon his charge. Acaciakit tumbled roughly with her brother in a small alcove protected by some low brush in camp, Poplarkit egging her on. The brown marks on the points of her body had gotten increasingly pigmented, likewise with her brother's gray markings. *Besides, I'm not even sure how what to do for Acaciakit.*

Cottonkit let his gaze rise up. He had found a love for the sky here. It was the most lovely blue on nice days, with white clouds drifting across. The sun was startlingly bright, though he did find an appreciation for even the blinding disk that sat in the sky of the Below. The white tom stretched out his legs from where he lay on

the sole large, flat rock in camp. While he had learned he could pass through the living cats, he didn't really care for the idea of walking through another being, so he preferred to stay out of the way. On chilly days like today, most of the clan cats would stay hidden away in dens or tucked in sheltered spaces. Only the kits would go out and brave the chill of the outside. The white tom-kit blinked lazily at the sky, watching clouds float by with a small smile. He let out a purr, clearing his mind of the confused thoughts that would haunt him every so often, and turned his attention back to where the kits had been. He shot to his paws in confusion as his eyes fell upon a now *empty* area.

"Acaciakit? Acaciakit, where are you?" He looked around, fur on end as his gaze swept across the camp. The three kits were nowhere to be seen, and with the wind buffeting from the direction of the nursery, he couldn't scent them from that direction either. He felt an uneasiness creep into his stomach as he gazed to his left toward the entrance. The tom bounded down from the stone he rested on in a streak of white and stars, darting out of camp.

Immediately, he was met with even greater winds in the open expanse of ZephyrClan's hilly, uncovered territory. The camp was without a guard, as often there would be a lull at sunhigh when most warriors were hunting or patrolling and the previous guard had just gotten off duty. With a clawing feeling in his stomach, he spotted Acaciakit along with her brother and Poplarkit. They were quite a ways off, but the camp looked over the open valley below it, being dotted with only a single tree.

"I told you I wasn't scared of the outside! I'm going to be the strongest warrior one day, y'know, so I can't be scared of anything!" Acaciakit bragged, but Cottonkit had a sense that some of the fear pummeling at his stomach wasn't coming from just *him*.

"Then what are the odds you go all the way out to Lone Ash?" Poplarkit leered at her. Acaciakit glanced uneasily toward the fat gray barked tree which had lost its leaves in the last moon. It was just as far from her as she was from camp. She had made it this far easily, so how much more dangerous could the Lone Ash be? She gave a firm nod with that reasoning in her head.

Cottonkit took a step forward to barge after her, but he was struck frozen momentarily. All of his senses dulled as a vision flashed through his mind. He felt sharp pain dig into his pelt, and he could see a massive bird as big as a full grown warrior, with outstretched talons sharper than any claws he had seen. As soon as the vision and the pain struck him, they disappeared. He reeled back, blinking away the shock. He looked up, but couldn't see the massive bird he had seen only moments ago. *Maybe it's Hollydapple trying to warn me? What do I do--* He paused, an idea running through his head. *Yeah, he'd know what to do!* Cottonkit turned tail, running back into camp. His eyes searched desperately until they fell upon the cat in question. He was sitting at the entrance to the warriors den, snowy fur sleek as he groomed it. *Blizzardstream*. Cottonkit bit at the warrior's oversized paw and bat at his foreleg.

"C'mon, Dad! C'mon, Acaciakit's in trouble! You have to come!" *Pistachiopaw said to send feelings to living cats, you just have to really push your aura onto them, that's why we have an aura in the first place.* "Please, please, Blizzardstream! I need you, please, Dad!" Blizzardstream stiffened, his green eyes shooting to the entrance. Cottonkit could feel the sudden uneasiness roll off the massive white tom as he stood and made his way out of camp. Cottonkit fell into his shadow, racing after him with a flurry of stars in the young kit's wake. Blizzardstream was *fast* as he broke into a full run. Poplarkit and Catalpakit were hunkered down in the tall grasses, still and unmoving, but Acaciakit with her bright creamy-white fur was easily spotted as she traced a line in the tall grass as she made her way toward the tree.

"Acaciakit!" His voice boomed across the valley, and she stopped to look up to the warrior as he hurdled toward her with incredible power in each stride. She shrunk down, though, as her eyes noticed something scarier than the looming trouble she would be with the adults for leaving camp. Cottonkit raced after his dad, slowing momentarily as the coolness of shadow fell across his back for a second. He raised his head as he continued to run, and a stab of fear scored his stomach as he saw the creature from his vision-- the massive bird with the outstretched talons. *A hawk! It's headed for Acaciakit!* Blizzardstream was almost there, he could almost reach her-- but it was too late. The hawk swooped down, and a scream

echoed from the young she-cat's throat as she was scooped up.

"*NO!*" The howl left his throat, and he heard cry from behind him as Catalpakit watched his sister be yanked from the earth by a great bird. Cottonkit watched with horror as the brown and golden bird beat his wings with mighty force to lift off the ground once more with its prey squirming in its grasp. Blizzardstream bunched his muscled and leaped up, claws extended. A spark of hope warmed his heart as claws caught the hawk's stomach, digging in and attempting to dragging it back down to earth. Cottonkit had made it to the fight, but all he could do was look up at the bird attempted to take off. Acaciakit's blue eyes were full of terror, but as they swept down to the ground, the paused as they fell on the starry white tom. He blinked. *Did she... see me?* Really *see me*? Blizzardstream was able to pull himself up enough to sink his teeth into the soft flesh of the bird. The hawk let out a squall, talons releasing from a sobbing Acaciakit. Blizzardstream released his grasp on the bird as well, as he could no longer hold on, and the beast beat away with pain. The white warrior gasped for air, dark red staining his paws and jaw as he looked down at the kit.

"What were you thinking, leaving camp?! You could have *died!"* Acaciakit seemed to pay him no mind, her eyes flitting back and forth where Cottonkit stood frozen in shock. *Acaciakit almost was stolen by a hawk. Acaciakit saw me. She could have... died? I'm not sure what that word really means... I've never heard it before?*

"Who was that? I-- I just saw a kit!" She meowed, eyes wide. Blizzardstream tipped his head in confusion, but checked the air and shook his head.

"There's no other kit here."

"No, I saw another kit! I swear, I did! He was all white, and he looked right at me!"

"It... it must have been from the fear, you must have... envisioned someone...," the warrior's eyes seemed to glaze over as he looked around as well. Cottonkit heard a whisper under Blizzardstream's breath: "Could it be...?"

"Acaciakit! Acaciakit, that was so scary!" Catalpakit raced through the grasses, Poplarkit just ahead of him. The older gray tabby blinked in shock.

"Y-You're bleeding, Acaciakit...! We need to get you to the medicine den," the older kit's voice quivered with fear. Blizzardstream scooped up the white and brown she-kit, blood flowering out of scratches where the hawk had grabbed her, and started off toward camp. The other two kits were careful to stick to the large warrior's side, not wanting to be stolen as well. Cottonkit blinked blearily and watched them depart.

I... I did it. I saved her.

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me rolling back in after like... seven months of not updating:

Anyway hope you guys enjoyed ?? I'm planning on continuing to update.

four | name

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four
name

It was a warm lick on his ear that woke Cottonkit up. He blinked his eyes slowly, confused at first as he came into consciousness. He felt a purr rumble in throat as he took in the dark furred she-cat in front of him. *Hollydapple!* She gave him another gentle lick between his ears, and he picked his head up to look her in the eyes.

"You've been working so hard lately, I've barely seen you in the last couple moons; you're always in the Below. You've gotten so big, Cottonkit!" She purred and settled down next to the white tom. It had been four moons since the hawk event, and he had spent every waking moment in the Below in fear of what could happen.

"I was in the Below all night...! How late is it...?" he mumbled, rolling to his side as he stretched his legs out. He *had* grown quite a bit; his legs had lengthened out, and kit fluff could only be found rimming his ears and tufting along his his face. His face still had a kit-like look to it, his ears being much too large still and needing to be grown into.

Hollydapple gave a soft purr and leaned in to groom down his unruly fur, straightening stray tufts of his stark white coat.

"Pistachiopaw already left, he said he didn't wasn't going to wait on your sleepy head."

"W-What?!" Cottonkit stumbled to his paws, drawing his own tongue over his fur quickly, missing a few spots. "I slept in too late! I have to go!"

"There's no rush, Cottonkit. She's not going anywhere; she'll be there when you get there," the queen soothed. He shook his head, though, and kneaded his paws uneasily.

"Acaciakit just turned six moons, so she's being made an apprentice today. I can't miss it!" There was a soft glimmer in Hollydapple's yellow gaze at this, and Cottonkit paused as he noticed the fainted blue tinge in her own aura. "I... what's wrong...?" he slowed, his head lowing cautiously. She gave a sad smile and gave him another lick over the ear. He tipped his head to the side with confusion.

"Nothing's wrong. You just... you remind me of my kits. The morning they were being apprenticed, they also were so quick to leave the den. They even left with--" she reached forward and fixed a piece of fur that stuck straight out along his neck, "--their fur still messy." She stood up. Cottonkit twitched his tail with thought before bouncing on his paws, eyes bright with an idea.

"You should come with me to the Below today! You can go visit them! And you could meet Acaciakit!" Hollydapple purred but shook her head.

"I can only go to the Below for emergencies. Only special cats like you who are a guardian get to go back and forth," she explained.

"Wha--? But that's not fair...!" He pouted, but she gently nose his ear.

"That's just how it is."

"Can you tell me about your kits then?"

"Maybe another time. C'mon, you shouldn't miss Acaciakit's ceremony." His ears burned with embarrassment.

"You're right, I almost forgot!" He shot out of his grass woven den. His paws had memorized the path to the Pool of the Below to where it was muscle memory. He followed the stream that wove through the star-filled golden meadows that he lived in. Familiar cats watched curiously as he ran by; usually he would share a "good-morning" with them on his way, but today was an important day that he was running late for.

The grassy fields slowly turned into the birch forest, a clear grassy path still cutting alongside the stream. The blue-green leaves blocked out much of the light that came from the pink StarClan sky that was void of a sun, the mist rolled around at his paws as he neared the Pool held a white glow to it. Lavender light slowly tilted into his vision, signaling his arrival to the Pool of the Below. He slowed to a walk, the crisp air that hung around the sacred waters almost burning his lungs. He didn't have time to take in the mystic beauty of the pond today. He waded into the warm, crystal clear water which reflected the purple hues, his eyes watching the light bounce off the smooth, pastel, quartz stones below. He took a gulp of air and plunged his head under the peaceful surface.

When he blinked his eyes open, he was staring not at the bottom of the Pool of the Below, but rather at the haze of the surface of water. He was in the Below. He resurfaced, breathing in the cool morning air. He waded through the sand and mud bottomed reservoir, paws landing on the green grassy shore. The sun was hung half way from the horizon to its peak, urging Cottonkit on to his destination. *I'm worried I might be late...!* His paws pattered softly as he crossed the hillsides, leaving a trail of stars that faded away in his wake. The hill veered up, where ZephyrClan's camp lay near the summit, cradled in a swath of brush and gorse protection. He passed through the entrance, being guarded today by the young, gray and cream mottled Birchmist. The she-cat had been made a warrior two moons earlier on the same day the Poplarpaw, Peonypaw, and Sagepaw had all been apprenticed. Cottonkit waved his tail in hello to the she-cat, though he knew she wouldn't respond.

The camp was loud with noise, the cats all gathered around the

giant hull of the tree. Cottonkit felt his heart sink, and he let out a small whimper. *I must have missed it.*

"Cottonkit! There you are, I was worried you weren't going to come!" He looked up to Pistachiopaw. The cinnamon and white tom glided over with a confident gait, a purr rumbling in his throat.

"Did... Did I miss it?"

"Nope! Everyone's just gotten gathered up! You've gotta come see Acaciakit, I think this is the first time she's let Pecanwhisker really groom her fur all the way! She doesn't look like she was dragged through a burr bush for once!" He laughed at his own joke, and Cottonkit hurried forward around the crowd. Sure enough, at the front facing the clan was Acaciakit with her chest puffed out, her brother at her side. She had grown into her markings over the moons, her fur was a creamy brown, while her face, legs, tail, and ears were a deep sable. Catalpakit had also grown into his markings, his creamy fur bearing a gray striped mask, legs, and tail. The siblings looked out with the same sapphire gaze: Acaciakit seemed to warmly challenge anyone who dared looked down on her, while Catalpakit held a cool glimmer in his eye. Finally, the sight of an amber red she-cat stepping out from a covered section of the tree hull led the clan to silence. *Aspenstar. I've never really watched her, but I've heard the adults talk about her.* Cottonkit settled at the front, Pistachiopaw at his paw.

"I remember when Sequoiapaw became an apprentice. His ceremony was bit different, and he got *two* because he's a medicine cat apprentice," the cinnamon tom meowed, a lilt of pride in his voice. Cottonkit flicked an ear, his attention on the scene before him.

"Cats of ZephyrClan! We gather today for a special ceremony. Two of our kits are old enough and ready to become warrior apprentices," the bushy furred leader settled behind the two point-marked siblings. Cottonkit glanced through the crowd for their parents. Pecanwhisker was right at the front, her long whiskers twitching with pride and joy. It had taken him several sunrises to figure out who his charge's father was. Their dad, Camphorwind, *never* came around the nursery. He sat near the front of the crowd

today next to a pretty white she-cat, but he was notably far from Pecanwhisker. The gray tabby point tom held the same startling blue eyes as his kits, and they fell upon the two with an unreadable expression. The white StarClan tom turned his attention back to the ceremony.

"Catalpakit. Do you promise to be faithful to your Clan as you learn the ways of the warrior?"

"I do...!" he took a slight step forward as he squeaked his answer. Aspenstar seemed bemused by his high-pitched voice, and a purr rumbled in her throat as she continued on.

"Then until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Catalpapaw." The spotted tabby leader lowered her head slightly to lick between his ears. Echoes of "Catalpapaw, Catalpaw...!" Rang through the crowd, as if the Clan were casting out the old name and trying out the new one on their tongue. She straightened up, looking out into the crowd. "Peachhop. You're ready for your second apprentice," a cream tom stepped forward, Cottonkit had seen the warrior lead many patrols while simultaneously being the most lighthearted cat during the moons he had been in the Below. "You taught Almonddusk well; I hope you pass on your skills of compassion and prioritizing the clan to this new apprentice." The wiry tom made his way to his new student, touching his nose to the younger's.

"Acaciakit," Cottonkit felt his heart rise with excitement, and he sat up as charge perked up. He could feel the energy buzzing through her, *literally*. He could feel the anticipation, the zeal, the *fire* that was Acaciakit's emotion. What she strongly felt, he could strongly feel. Never had that emotional connection been so strong, though. It had been mere pricks of pain after stepping on a thorn, but never had it been so vivid like this. He purred, green gaze glowing with an emotion he couldn't quite put a word to. It was warm feeling that swirled in his stomach, a *good* feeling. A hopefulness for the future. "Do you promise to be faithful to your Clan as you learn the ways of the warrior?"

The chocolate she-cat's voice was unwavering as she answered, "Always."

"Then until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Acaciapaw." Aspenstar lowered her head again, drawing her tongue between Acaciapaw dark ears.

"Acaciapaw... Acaciapaw!" The air was humming with energy as the Clan wondered just who would have to mentor the pawful of energy they had all grown to know.

"Camelliaheart. You are young, but more than ready for your first apprentice." Cottonkit blinked with surprise. While he knew of a couple adult cats in the clan, he had never really seen this cat, he had spent most of his time playing games admittedly without any other kit knowing he was playing with them. The crowd parted, and a ginger tabby patched white tom pad forward out from the back. He was of average build, and unlike Peachhop, he did not hold an air of pride or excitement. Rather, the tabby blinked slowly, taking in the seen with a relaxed amber gaze. Acaciapaw's energy did not die down in the presence of her new mentor, her sharp eye filled with the same unyielding determination. "I hope you pass on your knowledge of true strength and leadership to this new apprentice." Camelliaheart craned his neck forward, touching his pink nose to Acacipaw's pitch black one. Cottonkit could swear he felt the spark of energy on his own snout, and he blinked with shock. He took a deep breath, calming the storm of energy he felt from Acaciapaw, and sighed. Cottonkit tried to push down a pang of jealousy that threatened to poke at him. *I kinda... want a new name and a mentor to learn from, too....*

"Camelliaheart's super cool, you'll like him, Cottonkit!" Pistachiopaw chirped, drawing Cottonkit out of his thoughts. "Good thing you slept in, too, because you're going to be running all around ZephyrClan territory today to see everything." The younger cat pricked his ears with interest. *I've never gone beyond the connection pool, and I've always just come straight here!*

"Wait, will I get to see the other Clans? I know there's CopseClan of the trees, and BrookClan of the water!" His companion nodded with a smug grin.

"Mmhmm! Acaciapaw won't be going into the other territories, she's not allowed, but I guess you could if you wanted to? You might see

other Guardians if you go far in."

"Really?! Have you met others?"

"Oh, yeah, I've met most of the others. There's three in BrookClan, and one in CopseClan. There used to be two in CopseClan, but the older one's charge died of a sickness. They were pretty old, so I guess that's a successful Guardian." Cottonkit mulled the thought over. *Died. I've heard cats talk about that a little here and there. I think... I think that how the cats of the Below join StarClan.*

"Pistachiopaw... I have a question," Cottonkit meowed softly.

"Fire away!"

"The cats of the Below talk about death like it's a bad thing. If dying is what I think it is... how can it be bad? StarClan is kinda better than the Below. StarClan is vibrant, and there's always prey. Cats just get to play and relax every day! Why would cats *not* want to die?" This question seemed to shut the perky tom down. He blinked slowly, his ears drooping slightly at the weight of the question.

"We were unlucky. You and me, Cottonkit, we were unlucky," he murmured, eyes on his paws. His gaze slowly lifted to meet Cottonkit. "We never even got a chance to live. That's why StarClan lets us be Guardians, 'cause we missed our shot. StarClan is wonderful and perfect, but it's nothing *really* compared to living. In the Below, yeah, they struggle. They have to hunt and do patrols. They have to learn to fight, and they have to feel a lot of pain. But they get to grow."

"--I grow! I've gotten bigger!"

"Not like that, they get to... grow? Y'know? Like... *learn*. Learn from the struggles. I dunno, this is hard to explain; it's something you just have to experience for yourself. You'll figure out what I mean," he waved his tail gesturing to Acaciapaw. "You'd better get going. Acaciapaw's heading out!" Cottonkit turned to see the cat in question leaving camp alongside her brother and their mentors.

"Oh, yeah... thanks— I'll see you later!" He dashed after the

group, not wanting to miss ZephyrClan's territory. Though, the thought still spun in his head: life was hard, yet for some reason it was something he was tasked with experiencing.

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Weariness tugged at Cottonkit's muscles as he made his way back through the golden grassed fields of StarClan. The sky was the cool purple of night, laced with galaxies, and webbed with uncountable stars. Clouds of nebulas gave soft pinks and yellow hues along the endless expanse of StarClan's night sky. Cottonkit's mind wondered as he made his way home, speculating for a moment if the exhaustion he felt was was all due to his own fatigue, or if he felt Acaciapaw's weariness like how he felt her excitement during the ceremony. *I should ask Hollydapple, she'd know!* He came to a stop as he noticed a gathering of cats near the willow along his walk home, a faint white glow emanating from the group and stars faintly drifting from their pelts. The motherly black dappled she-cat on his mind sat among the other cats, he recognized the leader, Chaffinchstar, and the medicine cat, Morningleaf, from the day he was given his job, as well as Pistachiopaw.

"Hey, Cottonkit. You remember me? I'm Chaffinchstar, I told you you were going to watch over Acaciakit— well, 'paw, now." The brown and ginger mottled tabby stood up as he approached. Cottonkit made his way to the side of Hollydapple as he joined the group, head low with caution. *What's going on..?* "Hm. Still glued to Hollydapple's side, I see...," the leader meowed awkwardly, looking to the side to Morningleaf. The ginger patched tom shook his head with a sigh.

"What Chaffinchstar is *trying to say,"* the medicine cat shot a glare to the leader, "is you've grown up a lot in the last five and a half moons! You've done a great job of watching over Acaciapaw; you saved her from that hawk! She probably would have died if you hadn't been there." Cottonkit felt a warmth grow in his chest and he pressed behind Hollydapple with embarrassment.

"I just... I wanted to keep her safe, that's all."

"Well, to celebrate you and how far you've come, we wanted to give

you something!" Pistachiopaw purred, jumping on his paws. "Chaffinchstar..?"

"Oh, right. Cottonkit, step forward." The white tom stepped out from behind Hollydapple, who purred softly. "Do you promise to be loyal to Acaciapaw as you learn the ways of life in the Below?" Cottonkit's aura shifted to have a faint green hue of happiness as he realized what was happening.

"I do— always." He repeated what the chocolate she-cat had said earlier, the boldness of the word choice feeling unique but welcome on his tongue.

"Then, until you earn your full name, you will be known as Cottonpaw." The three others chanted the new name, "Cottonpaw! Cottonpaw..!" His fur felt hot, and he looked down at his paws with the biggest grin.

"Thank you...!" Was all he could manage to say. Pistachiopaw let out a hearty laugh and shouldered the younger apprentice merrily. Cottonpaw nearly toppled over at the weight of the tom.

"You're not a kit anymore, you deserve a new name!" The cinnamon Guardian laughed.

"We're proud of you, Cottonpaw," Hollydapple purred, her green eyes soft with care. "But, you should get some rest if you're going to keep working hard," she stood and swished her tail to the other cats. The tabby tortoiseshell leader dipped her head, heading off with Morningleaf at her side. The medicine cat grumbled about how the she had come off too harsh and awkward, but Chaffinchstar nearly flicked her tail and shrugged. Pistachiopaw gave Cottonpaw a friendly headbutt to the shoulder before meowing a "goodbye," and heading off.

Cottonpaw looked up to Hollydapple, the only cat left.

"You asked about my kits this morning, but I kind of pushed you away and told you to leave. I'm sorry I was dismissive," she nosed the young tom along, leading him back to his den. "I want you to feel comfortable talking to me, but I don't think I was really ready

to talk about it." Her eyes held a somber expression as she pad alongside him. Cottonpad felt his heart lurch, and he pressed his cheek to her shoulder for a moment.

"It's okay."

"I lived in BrookClan when I was alive. I had a mate, and we had three kits together. Two daughters, Mulberrypaw and Lichenpaw, and a son, Chicorypaw. The day they were apprenticed I... died." Cottonpaw slowed, eyes looking to the cat who raised him. She kept her eyes trained ahead. She shook her head, as if it would erase the memory. It didn't work: her eyes still held a haunted gloss after the action.

"...Did it hurt?"

She sighed as they came upon the den. She stopped at the entrance, and he made his way in. Cottonpaw sat in his nest, looking out at the queen. She was backlit by the vast cosmic islands and the endless sea of stars as she whispered her reply.

"Yes."

His stomach turned, and Hollydapple backed away.

"Goodnight, Cottonpaw."

"...G'night."

He was left in the darkness, frozen in place. It wasn't as if his mind was flooded with a torrent of thoughts and fears, rather what was engrained into his mind was merely the pained look on Hollydapple's face when she whispered her confirmation.

Finally, he swallowed thickly and blinked away the image. The new apprentice curled up tightly and let sleep consume him.

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an

sorry this is LONG (3300 words) but I'm actually not sorry at all

yeah I made up the apprentice ceremony I can't remember how it goes and I couldn't be bothered to look it up hahahaha we'll just say these clans do things their own way.

Also I did not realize that Catalpakit would be called Catalpapaw which reads as "Catal-papaw" to me so... that's a little rough but his warrior name is much easier on the eyes and tongue haha. Should I write it as Catalpa'paw or just keep going with Catalpapaw? Lmk.

five | feelings and visions

[image]

five
feelings and visions

_____

"I-- It's not f-f-fair...!" A small wail escaped from Catalpapaw's mouth.

Freezing rain pattered softly at the hillsides, the sky grayed out by clouds. Cottonpaw sat across from Acaciapaw and her brother, who were snuggly tucked in the apprentice den to escape the late leaf-bare drizzle. It had been a rough morning, the starry tom recalled.

"Acaciapaw, Catalpapaw. Come here, I have to tell you something important." Cottonpaw perked up with interest as the sibling's father, Camphorwind, pulled them aside. The tom always had an unreadable expression, but today it was particularly indiscernible. Storm clouds rolled in as they made their way to the side of camp where no-one else was. The moment he had his two kits alone, Cottonpaw hanging by Acaciapaw's side, Camphorwind spoke. "Your mother and I are no longer mates, I do not love her anymore. I'm with another cat now. I just

wanted to let you know." Cottonpaw's mouth dried and his eyes widened in shock. Catalpapaw was stunned, but Acaciapaw narrowed her eyes. Cottonpaw felt a spark of anger coming from the cat he was connect to. Their father turned to leave without another word, sending another current of spitting hurt and anger through Acaciapaw and, subsequently, Cottonpaw.

"So that's it? You're done with us? Onto another family?" She growled lowly. He swung his broad head to look back at his daughter. The starry tom sunk back uncomfortably; the anger of Acaciapaw's that he could feel was merely background noise to the nervousness he himself conjured in himself.

"You'll always be my children--"

"No. That's an excuse," she paused before continuing, "if you don't want us, then I don't want you. Don't... talk to me. Or Catalpapaw. You're a rabbit-hearted traitor, Camphorwind," her eyes were icy and full of hurt. Cottonkit lowered his head and followed her as she turned, leaving. "C'mon, Catalpapaw."

Catalpapaw whimpered softy as his sister sat next to him. She hadn't said a word since they had hidden away in the tall grasses and gorse bushes of the apprentice den. Cottonpaw could feel the overwhelming hurt roll off of the siblings, his own heart aching. *I couldn't imagine how my mom would feel if Blizzardstream just left her. Aldermist is always so sad because of me, and Blizzardstream is always there to help her.* He felt a pit in his stomach. He had only watched his mother from a distance; he felt so guilty. *It's... my fault she's sad.*

"It's not f-fair to mom. She does so much for us, and he-he does this?" His sapphire eyes looked out to where Camphorwind was sitting in the hailing rain. He stood as a cat approached, and Acaciapaw let out a hiss as he warmly welcomed the sleek white she-cat they knew to be Hemlockwish.

"He traded out mom for *her?*" Acaciapaw hissed, standing and pacing. Cottonpaw swallowed, soft yellow-green eyes following the she-cat. She stopped sharply, eyes glaring daggers into the cat she once called 'father.'

"I'm so sorry this is happening to you, Acaciapaw... this must be really hard to go through," Cottonpaw meowed, standing and pressing his nose into her shoulder fur softly. The electricity crackling from her died down with the touch, and he felt her exhale slowly. *I'm pretty sure we share emotions inadvertently, but I think... I think* I *just* caused *her to settle down! I've done something like it before with Blizzardstream; I urged him to go out and save Acaciapaw when she was a kit, and he did. I thought I could only do this kind of thing in emergencies, but if what I'm thinking is right, then I was able to use my words and feelings to change her mood.*

Acaciapaw sat down, looking to her brother.

"We're apprentices now, Catalpapaw. We're big. We can't pity ourselves, we have to be there for mom. So stop crying." The words were sharp. Catalpapaw blinked as if taken aback.

"You're mean," he meowed flatly. "I'm allowed to be upset," he meowed as he tucked his head under his tail from where he lay, and turned his ears back. Cottonpaw's heart yearned to comfort the tom. *This is hard on him. He basically just lost his dad; Acaciapaw can't you feel his hurt?* He looked to the sepia and chocolate colored apprentice. He saw her jaw clenched, and he thought for a moment. *Maybe I could... help her sympathize with him..?*

"He's going through a rough time, Acaciapaw. I think he just needs your comfort right now," he nosed her gently. The words were unheard as per usual, but it was if the feeling behind them were received. He heard her sigh, long whiskers twitching.

"I'm sorry. You're right, you're allowed to be upset; this sucks. I'll... I'll go get you something to eat." She stood, ducking her head as she braved the rain to retrieve a meal. Cottonpaw watched her leave, turning his gaze to Catalpapaw. His heart warmed as he saw the faint smile on the brother's face.

+ + +

The rain hadn't stopped by nightfall. Cottonpaw had followed Acaciapaw during her training session after the meal she shared with her brother. She hadn't said a word about the day's events to

Camelliaheart, but the tom didn't pry, either. He merely explained to her that she needs to anticipate the movements of her prey in order to successfully chase down a rabbit. Then, he made her run through the outcrop of trees that grew in the middle of a field near CopseClan's border in order to strengthen her speed and agility. Cottonpaw had followed along, and his own legs ached from the long exercise.

He followed her as she picked through the apprentice den past Poplarpaw and his two siblings, and settled in the nest next to Catalpapaw. The tom had long since fallen asleep, his dove-gray paws twitching in his sleep. Cottonpaw turned to head back to the connection pool when an overwhelming sense of sorrow overwhelmed him. His felt his eyes well up from the absolute pain and grief that so suddenly overtook him, and instantly he knew where this random feeling came from. He whipped around to Acaciapaw. She lay curled tightly in her nest, eyes shut and ears pinned back. Anguish rolled off her in waves, drowning and choking him. *She's thinking about Camphorwind.* Cottonpaw made his way through the den, sitting down next to her. He touched his nose to her temple, and the despair seemed to hit even harder. *She's been holding this back all day...* Cottonpaw knit his eyebrows together with concern, and ran his tongue between her ears.

"It's okay. It's okay. You have Camelliaheart, and Pecanwhisker is still here for you, too. Catalpapaw will never let you down. And... I mean, you don't know it, but I'm here, too. I'll always been here. Always. I'll keep you safe, I promise," Cottonpaw whispered comforting words, and slowly, the sadness ebbed away. He knew the pain was still there; his words were not wings to carry her away from the dark feelings, but rather a soft bed of feathers and pine needles to land on and try and process those hard feelings. Slowly, but surely, she drifted into a sleep. Cottonpaw held his breath as she dozed off, but didn't move from his spot. He touched his muzzle to the top of her head, and flashes of darkness invaded his vision. Flashes of fear, and yelling. He could see a flash Camphorwind and Pecanwhisker, teeth bared. His stomach turned. *This is her dream--it's a nightmare!* He felt his own heart rate rise at the thought: she was having a scary dream right in front of him! With the rising of his heart rate, hers did as well, and the nightmare progressed to

claws and teeth and blood and fear--

Calm down, Cottonpaw, you're making her nightmare worse! Calm down. You're from StarClan, you're her guardian. You can help her. He forced himself to slow his breathing, closing his eyes as he did so. *What calms me? What gives me peace?* He slowly blinked open his eyes, touching his nose to her fur. His mind went to his home, of the last slow morning he had with Hollydapple a few days prior before Acaciapaw's apprentice ceremony. Visions of the golden meadows dusted with stars and wildflowers, of Hollydapple's comforting licks on his head. Thoughts of sprinting through the fields slowly drifted to memories of StarClan's night sky.

He felt Acaciapaw's tenseness dissipate at his touch and sweet visions, and flashes of her dreams once again appeared in his mind, though this time, he saw unending smatterings of galaxies and the pride of catching a rabbit in the open fields. She was dreaming of hunting in StarClan. He smiled, and stood to leave. He paused, looking back over his shoulder to watch her peaceful sleeping form. His voice was soft as he spoke next, even though he knew he wouldn't be heard: "Sweet dreams, Acaciapaw."

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Camphorwind can eat my shorts. Also I don't mean to push out Aldermist and Blizzardstream; their story will be coming lol they're not going to be invisible parents.

six | impulse

[image]

six
impulse

"...It was really strange. Acaciapaw went to cheer up Pecanwhisker, but Pecanwhisker pretended like nothing was wrong and she was perfectly fine. Acaciapaw fell for it, but I could feel the sadness on Pecanwhisker. She was miserable... I can't believe Camphorwind would hurt them like that!" Cottonpaw narrowed his eyes at the last part.

"That's terrible," Hollydapple murmured. The sleek white apprentice nodded in agreement. The pair stopped as the older she-cat raised her tail, nodding ahead. A lone, white-furred rabbit sat in a small clearing in the starry field, nibbling at some clovers. "Remember what you learned from Camelliaheart's lessons to Acaciapaw in the Below," she whispered. Cottonpaw nodded, his

eyes not leaving the rabbit. He dropped low and stalked forward like he had practiced alongside the apprentices so many times before in the Below. *Try and get as close as you can.* There were several taillengths between him and the rabbit when it's ear twitched and it's black eyes noticed the young tom. It broke out into a frantic dash, and Cottonpaw hared after it. The creature veered left and right trying to shake him off, but the tom was able to keep up thanks to the rigorous training he endured alongside Acaciapaw. He bunched his muscles and pushed all of his strength into his last stride, pushing him close enough to hook the rabbit's hind leg and bring it to a stop. It stopped moving as he bit it's neck, and dragged the creature back to Hollydapple.

"You kept up really well, Cottonpaw! You're a natural ZephyrClan hunter. I'm not fast enough to catch rabbits, but I can catch any fish I set my eyes on," she admitted. Cottonpaw lit up with a smile, his aura radiating a bit stronger with the happiness in his chest at the compliment.

"Thanks, Hollydapple...!" The pair settled down to eat the rabbit. Though their stomaches did not rumble in StarClan, many of the residents still enjoyed to eat the tasty meals that were abundant in their land. "Hey, you should teach me to fish some day. I know a lot about ZephyrClan's culture, but I wanna learn about your culture, too!" He chirped as he bit into the flesh. A purr rumbled in Hollydapple's chest, and the faint glow radiating from her now tinged with green.

"I'll teach you all about BrookClan's fishing techniques, and how to swim while we're at it!" Cottonpaw's tail flicked back and forth with excitement and he nodded brightly. The continued to eat in silence before he piped up again.

"Oh yeah! I forgot to tell you; I was able to help Acaciapaw in a cool way. She was having a bad dream, and I was able to send her visions of StarClan and then she dreamed she was hunting here!" Hollydapple stopped, her eyes widening with disbelief.

"Cottonpaw, that's amazing! Not many Guardians can pass visions on like that! Usually they can just leave impressions on cats, to persuade emotions or actions, and even then it's usually only on the

cat they're connected to."

"Wait, but I persuaded Blizzardstream to go save Acaciapaw from the hawk."

"Yes, that's not a common ability, Cottonpaw," her voice was lilted with excitement. "That's amazing. You're very special," she purred. He looked down with embarrassment, his fur hot.

"T-Thank you, Hollydapple," he took a bite of rabbit, filling his mouth. She continued to eat as well, her mind turning with thought. He went in for another bite when he jumped, a sharp pain shooting through his shoulder. He let out a yip of pain, and the queen shot up to his side.

"What's wrong?" She looked him over, but he shook his head.

"I think it's Acaciapaw-- she hurt her shoulder. I have to go!" Cottonpaw took off to the Pool of the Below. It wasn't far from where they were, and before he knew it he was diving into the quartz-bottomed pool. Acaciapaw had been tasked with hunting training and a hunting patrol, so he had taken time off to be in StarClan with Hollydapple. *I shouldn't have left her! I shouldn't have left her!* He knew where she was not by location but by feeling. It was like how the birds knew where to migrate to; he was drawn to Acaciapaw wherever she was. He sprinted across the hill crests, connecting the dots that she was in the Training Bowl. He came upon the location soon, his shoulder still stinging with pain. It was a dip in the ground padded by moss and heather. Acaciapaw, however, didn't look pained at all. He couldn't smell blood at, all, he realized. He slowed, eyebrows knitting together with confusion.

"C'mon, Poplarpaw, I've been hit harder by Honeywing's kits! Auburnkit packs a heavy swipe than you," she goaded. Cottonpaw neared, noticing she was completely void of injuries, let alone injuries to the shoulder. *Maybe I hurt myself hunting? Or maybe she fell and hit her shoulder?* Poplarpaw curled his lip as the younger she-cat goaded him on, her eyes sharp as she egged him on.

Catalpapaw sparred with Peonypaw not far from the pair, though the older gray and cream she-cat had him pinned.

Camelliaheart sat at the edge of the hollow, looking up at the clouds with his half-hearted gaze. Poplarpaw's mentor sat off the side as well, though it seemed as if he was trying to distance himself. Cottonpaw cringed as he remembered who Poplarpaw's mentor was: Camphorwind. *No wonder she's trying to Poplarpaw so much; not only have they never gotten along, but his mentor is... him.*

"Whatever," Poplarpaw growled. He lunged at her again, as if this wasn't his first time trying the move. His jaws went to snap at her as a feign, while his large, gray tabby paw swiped at her shoulder. There was a hiss of pain, and Cottonpaw gasped as a sharp pang shot through his shoulder, this time feeling more real and painful than before. The scent of blood wafted to his nose and he stepped forward. Poplarpaw jumped back, yellow eyes wide. "I-I didn't mean to--!" Cottonpaw could feel the sharp anger from the chocolate point she-cat as she processed the pain. Blood welled up from a scratch on her shoulder, rolling down her foreleg.

"A-Acaciapaw, it's okay, it was an accident!" Cottonpaw tried to say, but it didn't seem to affect her. She barreled forward into the larger tabby. The force and suddenness of the attack was enough to knock him right over, and she raised her claws to strike him. Cottonpaw darted in front, as if he could take the blow but knew it would go right through him. "Acaciapaw, stop! This is wrong!" His yellow-green eyes looked right up into her, challenging her sapphire gaze which never seemed to waver. She paused, blinking a few times. She lowered her claws, and stumbled backward. Poplarpaw sat up, narrowing his eyes and spitting.

"You're *crazy*, Acaciapaw. You've got *thorns* for a *brain*!" He stood and went to his mentor's side. Camphorwind's icy gaze rolled over his daughter, and she stared him down. An uneasiness settled in the air as Catalpapaw and Peonypaw had also stopped their sparring to watch with wide eyes. Cottonpaw ducked his head nervously.

"Alright, alright, that's enough," Camelliaheart strolled forward, lightly shoving past Camphorwind as he passed, shaking the gray tabby point tom out of the stare-down. "Acaciapaw, come with me. I've got some special training for just you."

"You're just going to let her attack Poplarpaw like that?"

Camphorwind's voice was even, but the challenge was sharp in his eyes. Camelliaheart cast a look over his ginger tabby shoulder, shrugging.

"I've got better things to do right now than fight with you...," the ginger and white tom paused, and Camphorwind continued to glare. "Let's be honest, Camphor, we both know who'd win." Cottonpaw gasped at the blasé nature of the comment. *And he didn't even use Camphorwind's full name; how informal!* He strode out of the Training Bowl, Acaciapaw at his tail. Cottonpaw bounded after them after taking a moment to notice Camphorwind's expression: his nose crinkled with annoyance and eyes on the ground.

"Thank you...," Acaciapaw murmured as they crossed the fields. Camelliaheart looked down at the sepia she-cat and shrugged.

"You're going to be runnings laps through the copse as punishment."

"--Yeah, I figured." They were quiet for a moment. Cottonpaw felt something new coming from Acaciapaw: guilt. The white tom sighed as he decided not to cheer her up, rather letting her deal with the guilt as she faced her punishment.

Cottonpaw sat by Camelliaheart's side as they watched her run through the copse, twisting and pivoting skillfully around roots and saplings. She had gotten much faster at navigating the terrain, and was able to pelt around the copse at almost her full stride. *Acaciapaw is headstrong and confident, but I think she's starting to realize that maybe she's not always in the right....*

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I might be a minute before updating again. Next week is the last week of class and then finals and I'm bit behind in classes. I'll try and update next week (I've already started the next chapter) but it might be a second before I can update again. Life, y'know??

seven | full moon

seven

full moon

Cottonpaw felt his stomach churn with anticipation. A full moon hung in the sky, washing over the expansive grass fields of ZephyrClan's territory. The selected cats going to the Gathering made their way across the meadows walking mostly in a line with Aspenstar leading the pack. Acaciapaw bounded out of line and swerved back in, her face bright with excitement. As she passed Cottonpaw, he felt the nervousness dissipate. Her elation sparked inside of him and grew into a warmth that melted away his nervousness.

"Acaciapaw, quit jumping around...," Poplarpaw growled. She gave the gray tabby a sneer, rolling her eyes.

"It's my first gathering, Poplarpaw. I'm allowed to be excited. Wait, that's right, you don't know what excitement feels like, you're too--"

"Acaciapaw. That's enough," Pecanwhisker chastised her daughter. The chocolate point merely flicked her tail, falling back to walk alongside Catalpapaw. Pecanwhisker looked back at her kits,

and Cottonpaw tipped his head as he noted a sense of sorrow radiating from the brown tabby mother.

"You noticed it, too, hm?" Cottonpaw jumped as Pistachiopaw came to his side. The starry, light red-brown and white tom let out a laugh, shouldering the younger apprentice. "Sorry I scared you!"

"It's okay. Noticed what? Pecanwhisker?"

"Mmhmm."

"Yeah, I did. I... think she's sad about Camphorwind."

"Oh, yeah. I heard about that; there's a lot of gossip about it. Sometimes cats fall out of love, though, ya'know? I guess you've never been in love, though. You're only... seven moons now?"

"Six and a half. Acaciapaw is seven moons." Pistachiopaw's whiskers twitched with amusement.

"You're way more mature than I was at six and a half moons. I slacked on *all* my responsibilities to Sequoiapaw," he admitted sheepishly. "Hey, speaking of responsibilities, the other Guardians will be at the Gathering, y'know! I'll have to introduce you to them. They're really cool, I promise." Cottonpaw looked over to the chocolate point he was tasked to guard.

"I don't really wanna leave Acaciapaw too long, though...," he mumbled, his voice wavering with unassuredness.

"Oh, she'll be fine! It's a Gathering, nothing bad ever happens at Gatherings!" The light cinnamon tom purred, swishing his tail. "Relax; you're always so anxious over Acaciapaw!" Cottonpaw felt a smile tug at him, and he purred with a nod. The group of cats crested over a ridge overlooking the Gathering site. Trees dotted the landscape, growing into a thicker copse of aspens and oaks around the Gathering Place. The ground dropped down with steep slopes into a bowl-shape, and as Cottonpaw approached the lip of the dip, he was amazed at the sight before him. Moons and moons of cats had established winding paths down the steep slopes into the hollow, and before him more cats than he had ever seen were

gathered in the hollow. A massive oak lay fallen, and on it sat two cats poised with all the air and refinement he had seen from Aspenstar. *They must be the other two Clan leaders from CopseClan and BrookClan.*

Cottonpaw crept down the steep path after Acaciapaw into the foreign place. As much as he felt anxiety and fear, it was neutralized by the chocolate point apprentice's zeal and curiosity. He felt a purr rumble uncontrollably in his chest, warming his entire pelt from his pink nose to his tail tip.

"Hey, are you a new apprentice? I didn't see you at the last gathering!" Both Cottonpaw and Acaciapaw looked up as a young black tom pad up. He carried with him the smell of tree sap and squirrel. *He must be from CopseClan; the cats from BrookClan smell like fish and wet stones!* The tom was much bigger than the average ZephyrClan apprentice, with paws much too big for his body giving him a slightly awkward appearance. As Cottonpaw glanced around, he noted that many of the CopseClan cats were much bigger than ZephyrClan cats. CopseClan, of the trees, had big strong paws, longer fur, and stockier bodies than the field dwelling ZephyrClan. BrookClan, of the streams and creeks, were mostly long bodied with sleek fur.

"Yeah, I was just apprenticed this last moon. I'm Acaciapaw!" She puffed her chest out proudly as she introduced herself, and the all black tom purred.

"I'm Elkpaw! This is only my second gathering, so I think we should help each other out and be friends! Wanna come sit with me and Carppaw? She's from BrookClan." Acaciapaw's eyes lit up at this and she nodded. Cottonpaw followed his charge and her new friend over to where a brown tabby and white she-cat sat grooming her cheek fur.

"Hey Elkpaw! Who's this? Smells like heather, must be a new ZephyrClan apprentice!" Carppaw gave a side-smile. Acaciapaw introduced herself again with the same pride before Elkpaw could speak, and the BrookClan apprentice twitched her whiskers in greeting. "Here, I'll fill you in! You that that's your leader, Aspenstar, joining the other two leaders up on the Sleeping Giant,"

she gestured to the fallen tree. "The cat she's talking to right now is my leader, Cranestar." As she spoke, the wiry amber spotted tabby Cottonpaw had grown to respect touched noses with an older white and gray splotched tom. At Cranestar's other side was an all black she-cat with hooded golden eyes.

"And that's Dockstar!" Elkpaw spoke up next. "I don't wanna brag at all, but she's my mother!" His golden eyes gave a similar shine to the leader perched on the tree, and Acaciapaw's sapphire gaze glint with admiration.

"That's awesome! I want to be leader one day-- I'm going to be one of the greatest warriors ZephyrClan has seen, so I might as well be leader too!" Carppaw laughed at this statement. Cottonpaw felt his heart go to his throat, and he shot a look to Acaciapaw.

"I thought Elkpaw was goofy when he bragged about Dockstar being his mom, but you've gotta be even more guppy-brained to think you're going to be better than every other warrior in your Clan." The tabby narrowed her eyes challengingly, and Acaciapaw lashed her tail. She opened her mouth to speak, and Cottonpaw could feel the heat of her anger burn in his belly and cloud his vision. However, she was cut off.

"Hey now. I don't think it's silly at all. Someone's gotta lead ZephyrClan one day; why can't it be Acaciapaw?." This silenced the two she-cats, and Carppaw took a deep breath.

"Elkpaw, you're too idealistic," then as an afterthought she added, "You two go great together." She turned her attention to the Sleeping Giant as Dockstar called for attention.

The black leader waved her tail and silence seeped into the hollow.

"Good Evening, welcome to the Gathering tonight. CopseClan will start tonight, if that's alright?" The other two leaders blinked their acceptance, and the large she-cat continued. "CopseClan has seen good hunting this last moon. Our new apprentices continue to grow and get stronger. We scented fox near...," Dockstar continued on, but Cottonpaw found himself getting distracted as his name was

called.

"Psst, Cottonpaw! Hey, Cottonpaw!" He turned, startled, only to find Pistachiopaw calling him amongst a group of starry furred cats. Cottonpaw looked to Acaciapaw, but seeing her enraptured in the current events, he turned and made his way over to the older apprentice. He slunk close to the familiar tom, eyes raising to meet the four other new cats nervously. They were all much bigger, fully grown StarClan Guardians.

"So this is the lil' scamp Cottonpaw I've heard about!" A golden tabby tom stood up in greeting, his emerald eyes gleaming with excitement. "I've heard you've got quite the pawful with your charge, Acaciapaw! Oh, the name's Hickorysplash! I watch over Thistleriver in BrookClan," he meowed with a grin. Cottonpaw lowered himself to the ground, overwhelmed by the the boisterous tom.

"Calm down, Hickorysplash, you're scaring the poor thing!" A long furred, gray and cream mottled she-cat meowed, her voice smooth as stones in a riverbed. She shoved the golden tabby aside, and the dipped her head forward to touch her nose to Cottonpaw's ear. She smelled sweet like honeysuckle bushes, and her fur was groomed to shine like the stars that dusted her pelt. "I'm Falcontuft, I'm the Guardian of Raspberryfur in CopseClan. This here's Sootbreeze, she watches over our medicine cat in our Clan," she referenced the starry black she-cat sitting with her tail wrapped tightly around her paws. Sootbreeze merely blinked slowly in greeting.

"And I...," the last of the four started speaking, "...am Larkchaser. I'm of CopseClan as well, where I watch over the warrior Fennelwind," his speech came out slow and deliberately, as if every word were thought of during the other three cat's introduction.

"Alright, now that introductions are over, how's the job going, Cotton? You're not stressing out *too* much are you? You look like the kind of guy to stress out too much...," Hickorysplash looked the white tom up and down. Cottonpaw sighed and shrugged.

"I mean, I don't know. I just try to do the best job that I can to keep Acaciapaw safe. Sometimes that means she stresses me out a lot...." As if on cue, his ears grew hot with an echo of some else's anger, and loud screeching interrupted the monotone new deliver from Cranestar. His own stomach dropped with anxiety as he whipped around *Oh no. Acaciapaw!* The cream and chocolate she-cat had her fur bushed out on end as she yelled at the brown tabby Carppaw. Cottonpaw was frozen in his spot; all he could do was watch in horror.

"You rotten fish-eater! You take that back right now!" The apprentice hissed. Carppaw's face was twisted with an equal anger and she spat back,

"I'd only take it back if it were a lie!" Elkpaw pushed his way between the quarreling she-cats, and a heartbeat later Camelliaheart grabbed his apprentices scruff and ripped her away from the scene.

"What do you think you're doing?" His hiss was low, and it was the first time Cottonpaw and Acaciapaw had seen him show any sort of anger. The point she-cat instantly was stilled by this, and she looked away, fur still hot.

"Carppaw said ZephyrClan cats are too small and skinny to ever be renowned, great warriors! That's not true, because I'm going--"

"What's the meaning of this?" Aspenstar's voice boomed from the top of the fallen tree, her eyes narrowed to slits. The air was silenced, only crickets daring to hum at the air. "Acaciapaw, you dare interrupt a gathering, and with fighting no less? Do I really have to remind you this is a peaceful event? Camelliaheart, get your apprentice in line before so help me I assign her a mentor who won't be so soft."

"I understand, Aspenstar, it won't happen again," the white and ginger tom bowed his head. Cottonpaw could feel emotions churning at the warrior, though he couldn't describe it so easily as he could describe Acaciapaw's emotions. He could taste the slightest hint of anger on Camelliaheart, but more-so there was frustration, a pang of hurt, and shame. Cottonpaw looked to Acaciapaw uneasily,

and for the first time he felt an overwhelming wave of guilt overcome the she-cat. It raged in his stomach, making him feel sick. Whispers began to fill the air as cats stared at the spectacle and muttered to each other, before finally Cranestar called for attention and began speaking again. Cottonpaw looked back to his fellow Guardians, gritting his teeth. His eyes burned and grew wet.

I always have to be hypervigilant and watch her every move! If I take my eyes off her for a second, she gets in trouble!

"Hey, Cottonpaw, I'm sorry!" Pistachiopaw started.

"Yeah, you really couldn't have done anything to stop that," Hickorysplash murmured sympathetically.

"You can't control what Acaciapaw does, Cotton," the dilute tortoiseshell Falcontuft consoled.

Cottonpaw shrugged off their words, snapping away with his head low and his jaw tight. He stormed off toward Acaciapaw, anger burning at his belly. This time, though, it came from himself rather than from her. He couldn't let her out of his sites for the rest of the night, it seemed. *It's not fair!* He glared at the point apprentice as she sat sheepishly next to her mentor and far away from other cats in silence. *I'm really just... a glorified kit watcher! It feels like... I'm not actually living like they say I get to live.*

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an

hey guys! I know it's been.... a year and a half... since my last update. sorrrryyyyy!!!! hope you enjoyed anyway.

eight | the identification

eight

the identification

The air was sticky with humidity, even though it was well past moon-high. Cottonpaw was laid out on his side, licking his shoulder in an effort to cool off. *I should get going...* He twitched his whiskers and looked up at the waning moon. It has been several sunrises since the Gathering, and Cottonpaw had been spending more time watching Acaciapaw. Even now, it was well past moon high, yet his stomach churned at the idea of leaving her alone. His yellow-green eyes softened as he looked to the chocolate point she-cat as she slept in her grassy woven nest. *I wish I could just talk to her. I want to just talk to her and tell her I'm here.*

A sigh escaped him, and he got to his paws. Suddenly, a tightening twisted his stomach, and fear jerked at his heart. He didn't even need to look at Acaciapaw to know it was her. Before he could even think, he was already at her side. The she-cat's whiskers twitched, and her paws kicked out as she dreamt. He settled down next to her and touched his nose gently to her forehead.

"It's okay. I'm here... I'm here, Acaciapaw. You're safe," his voice was soft. He thought of warm StarClan skies, the lush golden grass, the swaths of glittering stars. He shut his eyes, sending the dreams of hunting and safety to the young she-cat. As he lay there, sending more thoughts of running through prairies full of crickets and rabbits and wildflowers, he slowly felt himself drift. He opened his eyes, and blinked in shock. He was no longer laying next to his

Charge, but rather standing in among lush phlox dotted fields. The blue flower stalks rustled from behind him, and he turned to see a familiar chocolate splotched face. Acaciapaw!

His heart sped up and he felt a purr rumble in his throat. His tail waggled, and he bounded up, tagging her with a paw before bouncing away. Her fur was warm, and he could feel the solidness of her muscle beneath. She narrowed her eyes playfully and bounded forward to tag him back. Cottonpaw twisted away with a *mrow* of joy, and scampered away through the grasses. Acaciapaw fell in step and chased after him with a purr. He jumped over a pile of rocks, but felt her paw connect with his hind leg.

"Gotcha!" She smiled. He turned to tag her back, but she had sat down and therefore tapped out of the game. The young apprentice studied his face and tipped her head to the side.

"I feel like I know you," she meowed at last. "You're... familiar. As if I've known you for my whole life. I've never met you though." Cottonpaw blinked in shock. Was he allowed to tell her? Would it be okay? He shuffled his paws and bit at his cheek.

Acaciapaw took a step forward, reaching a paw up the rockface he stood on. Her chocolate brown nose reached up to sniff at his white fur.

"Are you from StarClan?" Her eyes glowed with disbelief.

"Wha-- erm... Oh, no! I have to go!" He backed up on the rock, but she lightly jumped up to join him. He squeezed his eyes. *C'mon, I need to wake up and get out of this dream!*

"Wait, what's your name?!"

He cocked his head to the side. Telling her his name wouldn't hurt... right?

The prairie grasses and phlox blooms started to flicker, fade, and come to a close.

"Cotton--"

He was back in the woven grass apprentice den. Cottonpaw watched his charge blink open her sapphire eyes. Crows cawed in the hazy dawn light. Acaciapaw seemed dazed, and she looked around in confusion. She sat up and stretched out the sleepiness, standing and stretching out each hind leg one at a time. He followed her as she exited the den, only to bump right into Camelliaheart. He had been a little colder since the gathering, but today he had a look of surprise.

"I'm shocked you're awake already...!" the tom meowed, looking her up and down. Acaciapaw looked around, confusion and drowsiness still clouding her gaze. "C'mon, we're on for dawn patrol." The black and white Pochardpounce alongside the newly-made-warrior Birchmist stood by the camp entrance, preparing to head out.

"I... had a strange dream...," she started. Camelliaheart whisked her along, and the four cats head out with Cottonpaw trotting after them.

Pochardpounce pricked their ears. "Yeah? I had a dream two nights ago that I could fly through the air and I caught so many birds and fed the entire clan!" Birchmist purred with amusement and added that she doesn't remember any of her dreams. The patrol carried on in the stillness of the morning. Grasshoppers leaped above the grass before disappearing back into the fields. Birchmist and Pochardpounce discussed the best way to use bird feathers for decoration. Camelliaheart had everyone stop so he could point out an osprey nest near a creek's edge, and warn Acaciapaw of the bird-of-prey's potential danger.

The patrol continued on in silence. Cottonpaw could feel her clouded thoughts.

"Has anyone heard of a white cat whose name starts with Cotton? He may be Cottonpaw or Cottonkit, I don't know...." The patrol froze in their tracks. Cottonpaw's stomach turned, and he wasn't sure if it was just from him or if it was also a feeling rolling off all of the cats around him.

Camelliaheart was the only cat who dared to speak.

"I'm not sure where you heard that name, but don't bring it up again. We don't talk about Cottonkit." The white and ginger tom had a dark look in his normally nonchalant eyes.

"You didn't know, though, Acaciapaw," Birchmist took a small step toward the apprentice. *Why would I be an off limits subject in the Clan?*

Camelliaheart swished his tail and sighed, nodding. "Cottonkit was Aldermist and Blizzardstream's only kit. He would've been born not long after you were, in fact. He was a stillborn." Acaciapaw's head tilted slightly in confusion, which her mentor picked up on. "That means when he was born, he wasn't alive. Aldermist took his death very hard, so we don't talk about him to ease her grief."

The apprentice's blue eyes went wide. Cottonpaw looked down to his paws, and a pale sky blue tinged his starry aura.

"I... I'm sorry. I just heard the name somewhere and was curious," she murmured. Pochardpounce licked her ear gently.

"It's okay, you didn't know. Just don't bring it up again, especially not to Aldermist." The patrol carried on in silence with mourning rolling off the older cats. Acacia paw held a similar air of sadness, though a curiosity continued to prickle at his belly, and therefore also at his own. He shook it off, his own thoughts trudging through the heaviness of his own departure.

He bowed his head, and parted with the patrol to head back to camp. He decided to spend the rest of the day with his grieving mother. *I'm sorry I couldn't stay with you in life, Mother. I hope you can feel that I'm here now.*

A mourning dove crooned a lamenting song, and the tall grass whistled along to the dirge. The call faded into the hush of the fields. Cottonpaw closed his eyes, listening until the song that reflected his own heartbeat — a somber call shared between all.

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an

I'llllll drop this hereee annnd walk away. Yeahhhh I know it's been a while since I updated... like..... 3 years..... OOPS! At this rate I may finish in this lifetime, around 50 years from now!!

lol but for real maybe I'll get on a roll and crack out a few chapter rn!

nine | the missing piece

[image]

nine

the missing piece

_____

It was a perfect weather for the New Leaf day. Bees hummed in the air, buzzing along to the purrs and chatter emanating from the ZephyrClan camp. Cottonpaw soaked in the warm rays from the flat stone that rested near the entrance to the hollow, his ears twitching as he picked up on the gossip from the Clan. Pistachiopaw stretched out next to him, his eyes closed as he sunned his cinnamon dappled fur. Acaciapaw was out training with Camelliaheart, but Cottonpaw

had chosen to spend the day in camp with his friend, rather than obsessing over her every move. That decision only came after Pistachiopaw noted that he "didn't have to be a burr stuck to her fur."

The two had shared tongues most of the morning: Pistachiopaw was proud to share that his own charge, Sequoiapaw, would be made a full medicine cat very soon, and Cottonpaw gleefully pointed out his mother grooming herself outside the warrior's den. Today was a good day for her, she was feeling less saddened than normal. The changing of the season seemed to have a positive effect on her.

"Oh, there's Camphorwind," Cottonpaw noted. Pistachiopaw opened an eye to see the gray point marked warrior and sat up with interest.

"I'm still so shocked about what he did to his family last moon. It's sad."

"Yes, I know. Oh, there's his new mate, Hemlockwish." The pair watched the sleek white she-cat exit the herb-scented medicine den. Cottonpaw felt a sickness to his stomach at the sight of the two, born from his protectiveness of his charge. Hemlockwish proudly strut up to Camphorwind, and a strangely sweet scent followed her, making Cottonpaw feel a bit more at ease for some reason. She murmured something to him, and as he smiled broadly, she pad up to the nearest group of warriors sharing tongues.

"I just wanted to share that I'm expecting Camphorwind's kits!" She closed her eyes and basked in the congratulations from her clanmates, and Camphorwind purred as he accepted the well wishes by her side. The smell made sense— it was a queen smell. A sudden wave of cold emptiness rolled off a cat and knocked into Cottonpaw with a sudden weight. It was the feeling of grief. His attention sharply went to where it came from: Pecanwhisker. The cinnamon tabby she-cat slipped out of camp without anyone the wiser... that is, except for Cottonpaw's noticing.

"Pecanwhisker must be so upset. He moved on so fast.. I wonder how Acaciapaw will take it," Cottonpaw murmured. Pistachiopaw let a small sigh of agreement.

"I feel terrible for Pecanwhisker. Fallowbark and Sequoiapaw have been giving her guidance the last two moons in the medicine den, but she's going through so much. You'd better be ready to help Acaciapaw— she's quick to use her claws. At some point, she needs to grow out of that."Pistachiopaw meowed, and glanced over to Cottonpaw with a seriousness in his eye.

Cottonpaw's fur grew warm, and he clenched his jaw. Acaciapaw was always making him look bad, like it was *his* fault she was such a bramble-brain. He got to his white with Pecanwhisker in mind, and gently slipped down the rock face, setting off toward the camp's bushed wall entrance. Before he made it far, another pang of sadness caught his senses. To his left, it was his mother Aldermist. The she-cat had stopped washing her foreleg, and instead had curled up and turned away from the camp's center.

Forgetting about Pecanwhisker, he scampered over to the gray tabby queen. *I think it hurts Mother to see another cat expect kits. I wish I hadn't died. Then she wouldn't be sad all of the time.*

He gently sat down at her side, letting the stomach-churning emotions wash over him. His eyes grew hot, and he shut them tight to fight back the stinging tears. He lurched backward... it was so much!

No, I can't back away. Acaciapaw wouldn't back down from something. This is my purpose. He pressed his muzzle to her side for the first time. His heart lightened at the thought... this was the first time he had ever pushed up close to his mother and felt her soft, warm fur against him. It wasn't unlike when Hollydapple would snuggle with him when he was a kit, though his mother's longer fur was much softer and had a scent like wildflowers caught in it.

The sadness ebbed away as he pushed thoughts of wild prairie flowers and frolicking through meadows and sunny days to his mother. He sent her the feelings of joy that came with running through the fields of StarClan. He felt her being to relax ever so slightly. He felt a similar feeling radiate off of her. A feeling that was warm, that was endless and full and gripping. A feeling of love.

"I love you, Mother," he whispered into her fur. A small cry left the

queen.

Sudden paw steps sounded, and the impressive frame of Blizzardstream appeared. He curled up close to his mate, eyes full of worry.

"It's okay, Aldermist. Are you thinking about him again?" She nodded, and he gave her a few licks on her cheek. The she-cat gave a small smile, which caused him to pause.

"Yes, but... it's different this time. I... I know it's silly, but I almost feel like he's here, right now. He doesn't want me to be sad."

Blizzardstream purred and pushed his head against her's, whispering comforting words in his beloved's ear.

Cottonpaw let his head rest against his mother's side, listening to the soft words exchanged between the two. It was as if some missing piece of himself had been found and slotted into place as he basked in the love and care between his parents and himself... though, he wasn't *really* there. A sadness returned to his heart, though it came only from within. Something new joined it, too: an angry itch of resentment.

I should be here for real. I should be here alive, and my family would be whole and full of joy. The warm pricks of tears returned to his eyes, and he buried his face in Aldermist's fur, carful not to pass through her with his ghostly pelt.

Both Aldermist and Blizzardstream sniffled and cried with him, grieving still for their lost son.

A family together, yet distantly apart.

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Another chapter!! I worked hard and made this (below), art is NOT

BY ME!!! It's from the popular ClanGen game, there's a website where you can create your own kitties using the pixel art from ClanGen (which I can't link here due to wattpad restrictions, but you can look it up!) I just made a little sprite for each kitty in the Clan. It was fun for me :—) ClanGen is what made me remember I love writing about these silly kitties, so I wanted to make some little icons of ZephyrClan! Maybe at some point I'll make a little pixel background of ZephyrClan camp.... But def not today lol. I tried to make it look like they were all in the camp and like talking with their friends and family.

This also serves as a sort of Allegiances for this point in the story.

ten | bitterness

ten

bitterness

Clouds drifted softly through the peach toned StarClan skies. Chickadees sang from the nearby bluish green leaved trees, and a breeze rustled through the tall grasses that Cottonpaw lay back on. His eyes followed the clouds, though his thoughts were elsewhere. A twisted feeling had been growing and festering in his stomach since a few days previous when he had curled up with Aldermist and Blizzardstream. It left a sourness in his mouth, to where when Acaciapaw had bickered with Poplarpaw the day before, he refused to calm her scathing tongue. Rather, his fur bristled in annoyance

and he left for the day.

Cottonpaw rolled onto his side, turning his gaze to a rollie pollie that itched along the earth toward cover under a leaf. He had refused to go down to the Below for the day. He couldn't stand to spend it watching Acaciapaw. *It's not fair. I don't want to watch over Acaciapaw, it's not fair! I want to run through the below with solid paws and hunt for my Clan. I want to patrol the borders from rogues, I want to play with the other apprentices and joke with them too! I want to make my mother proud of me... not keep Acaciapaw out of trouble! It's not fair!*

His own bitterness churned in his stomach, but then was joined by a sparking anger that was distinctly Acaciapaw's. It soon dissipated, and then was replaced by a sinking, sickening feeling of shame and regret echoing from the she-cat in the Below. Cottonpaw narrowed his eyes and dug his claws into the earth to get a different sensation and move his mind away from his charge. *I don't want to kitsit her anymore!*

He could hear pawsteps echo through the soil that his right ear was pressed against, and he picked his head up to see who approached.

"Cottonpaw, are you alright?" It was Hollydapple. The black she-cat had had a scent of fresh kill still on her whiskers— she must've been hunting. He set his head back down, turning his face away with a slight scowl. A deep, green brown of bitterness emanated from his aura. A nasty color for an equally nasty emotion.

"Nothing. I'm fine...," he grumbled. She got closer, nosing him gently. He sat up with a sigh. "I just— I don't want to watch Acaciapaw anymore! I don't want to! I wish I were alive, I want to be alive with my mom and dad!" The brown and green whips of his emotional aura shifted to a blue tint.

Hollydapple was quiet for a moment, and he turned to look at her. The queen had a delicate, angular face, and she studied him carefully with her almond-shaped eyes.

"The second you arrived in StarClan, I was tasked to look after you. I had just died only a moon before you arrived, and I had been so

distraught at my early passing. I missed my three kits more than anything. Being a second mother to you saved me. You helped me to be at peace with being on this side of existence. I always knew you'd get like this one day, what with the job you were given. It's impossible not to. I'm sorry you died, but it's how it is. Your body just couldn't survive in the world, it wasn't any cat's choice." Hollydapple paused to lick Cottonpaw's cheek and top of his head. He shuttered in sadness, and pressed his muzzle to her chest.

She continued, "StarClan tries to give kits who die a second chance. We let you grow older, and give you a job where you *have* to experience Clan life. You watch over Acaciapaw so that you can live. You watch over her so that *she* can live. Chaffinchstar and Morningleaf foresaw Acaciapaw's self-destruction; she's too fiery to be left alone. So, we assigned you to protect her. That's why you get an apprentice name, and one day, a warrior name. You're doing a warrior's job of protecting your Clanmates. I know you want to be with your parents— you're so close to them. That's why I'm not allowed in the Below like you are. But, one day, hopefully a long time from now, Aldermist and Blizzardstream will join you here for as long as stars light up the night sky."

Cottonpaw sighed deeply into her fur.

"I guess I'm being selfish. I'm sorry, Hollydapple...." There were no harsh words from the queen, rather a few licks to his ears and top of his head. He couldn't help the purr that escaped his throat.

"You didn't understand before. It is a sad what happened, but we just have to choose to accept it and work with what we've got with where we're at."

The breeze rustled on, and the crickets continued their tunes.

"Hollydapple... can I ask how you died?"

She stiffened for a moment before relaxing and nodding. "It was the day my three kits— Mulberrypaw, Lichenpaw, and Chickorypaw— were apprenticed. It was green leaf, too, I remember. Their ceremony had just finished, and they went to explore the territory with their mentors. I, too, went out to wonder the territory. I just

wanted to get out and go for a swim after six moons of watching over them in the camp. I was only at the river's edge for a few moments before the wind shifted and I picked up the scent of a fox. I don't remember how I knew, but I knew that my son was nearby, so I went right for where they were to warn them. By the time I got to them, the fox was already there and had injured Junipermask—Chickorypaw's mentor. Chickorypaw was frozen in fear. I fought and saved my son, and his mentor too. When help came, the fox ran off. But... it was too late for me... I opened my eyes, and I was here."

The tall grasses let out a *shhh* in the wind.

Cottonpaw pushed his head further into Hollydapple's chest.

"It's okay, Cottonpaw. I got to save my son and my clanmate. I can't say that I wouldn't have it any other way, because I'd be lying. If it were up to me, I would've lived to see them grow up. I can't change what happened though, I can only work with where I'm at now. I choose to support you as you grow, and enjoy my time here in StarClan."

I'm sad that I missed out on so much, but I can't let that stop me from missing out on more.

"I have to go...," he turned, feeling an itch in his paws to hurry. Hollydapple tipped her head with interest, and he started to set off toward the Pool of the Below. "I have a job to do!"

eleven | will to protect

Content Warning// dark themes, suicide discussion.

eleven

will to protect

Golden sunset light set ZephyrClan's hollow ablaze with color. New leaf had led into long days of Green-Leaf, and the camp had flourished with growth. Cottonpaw strode in proudly after Acaciapaw, his charge hauling in a large rabbit proudly. Cottonpaw had caught up to Acaciapaw's size— being half a moon younger, he had been a bit smaller than the she-cat the whole time he had been with her. Now at nine moons, he had finally reached the same height as her. *Maybe I'll get even taller! Blizzardstream is big, maybe I'll take after him!* He looked to his father lovingly, who was sitting with Aspenmist. The silver tabby queen was purring and chatting with her mate, and Cottonpaw had seen her take part in more and more patrols.

Camelliaheart pricked his ears as his apprentice dropped off the impressive catch, and wandered over. Acaciapaw closed her eyes proudly as the ginger splotched tom assessed the rabbit and then the she-cat.

"Very nice catch, Acaciapaw," he finally allowed the compliment out. Her tail swished high in the air.

"I startled it a little early, so I started to run out of energy before I caught it. I got a second wind out of nowhere, which let me finish strong and catch it!" Her eyes gleamed as she spoke. Cottonpaw purred from her side, invisible but soaked in the praise as if it were his own catch. In a way, it was. He had sprinted just behind her and urged her on in the hunt, shouting at her to "*keep going, you're right on its tail!*" He had caught up in height, but Acaciapaw was still faster than him.

Camelliaheart dipped his head slightly with approval. "You're improving quickly," he meowed, voice even. "Your stamina is getting much better than it was last moon." This caused Acaciapaw's whiskers to twitch with smugness. His eyes moved to the nursery for a heartbeat before returning to her. Cottonpaw narrowed his eyes as he noticed the ginger splotched warrior hesitate for a moment, but smooth over his features before the less-perceptive Acaciapaw noticed.

"Something's off, but I'm not sure what!" Cottonpaw prodded her with a paw, trying to get her attention. The she-cat seemed to register some semblance of perception from him, and her head tilted to the side as she studied her mentor.

"What is it?" She meowed. Camelliaheart waved his tail nonchalantly, but then hesitated again. A soft sigh escaped him, and he gave in.

"Nothing bad... it's just— Hemlockwish had her kits earlier today. Two of them." Acaciapaw's signature slight narrowing of eyes returned to her face. Cottonpaw felt the tumbling sensation in his stomach which came from her. Any time Hemlockwish or Camphorwind were brought up over the past two moons since the announced pregnancy, she had this same feeling of pain, anger, and tension. "...I know it's a complicated situation. Do you want to train to get your mind off it? Or I can give you some time alone, if you'd prefer?" Acaciapaw thought for a moment before turning.

"Left alone. I'm going for a walk," she turned without another word

and head back out of camp. All of the pride, smugness, and joy deflated from her, leaving behind the simmering resentment she held in her heart. Cottonpaw ducked his head anxiously and scampered after her out of camp. They all knew this day would come when the queen announced her pregnancy, but how was he going to handle this?

Before she got to the bush exit, she stumbled into her own brother as he trampled in. The gray tabby point tom desperately drank in deep breaths of air. A strong feeling of worry came from him, a familiar feeling for Cottonpaw.

"Acaciapaw! I—" he inhaled deeply, "I've been looking all over for Pecanwhisker. Auburnkit said he saw her leave looking *really* upset, and I had a really bad feeling... now, I can't find her! I came back to check camp... have you seen her?" Acaciapaw's eyes widened and brows knit together.

"No... and I haven't scented her here since I've been back, but I just got here. Where did you just come from?" Her voice was even as she spoke, but Cottonpaw could feel her heartbeat *thump thump thump* in his own chest.

"I checked the CopseClan border...," his flanks heaved as he continued to catch his breath, "and I'm about to go to the BrookClan border."

Acaciapaw pushed past him. "You stay here, I'll go out that way. She's just upset. Probably just needed to clear her head." Catalpapaw touched his tail to her shoulder and she paused. His blue eyes held a new concern in them.

"Will you... know what to say to her? You can't say something rough like you usually do." Cottonpaw glanced from brother to sister, but she kept her composure and fur flat. Without replying, she continued out of the camp.

As soon as Acaciapaw's chocolate point colored paws were out of camp's walls, she broke into a run. Cottonpaw tailed after her, his mind whirling just as fast as his feet. All he could pick up from her was something akin to a storm cloud she was trying to process.

Hemlockwish had her kits, and Pecanwhisker was upset and ran away.

The last two moons since the announcement, Cottonpaw had noticed the warm brown tabby shrinking away more and more from camp and from her kits. *This must've been some breaking point for her.* The sun crept lower and lower to the horizon, the golden light beginning to be blocked out by the swaths of bushes and trees.

Grass continued to lick at Acaciapaw's sides, parting as she charged through them. Cottonpaw merely passed through them without rustling them as he kept up. The sun dipped below the horizon, leaving behind a pink sky quickly turning dark when finally they picked up the scent of Pecanwhisker.

They were nearing the Bluff, which marked the border. It was a stony uphill slope dotted with aspens that led to a sheer drop off, and the river rushed relentlessly below. A sickening feeling began to claw at Cottonpaw's belly as his mind raced to worst case scenarios.

"Pecanwhisker—!" Acaciapaw called, and he heard the slightest waiver in her voice. The anxiety worsened with that quivered note from her. The grass lessened, poking between flat stones. The warrior came into sight, sitting with her back to them near the edge. Acaciapaw carefully traipsed up the rocky slope, weaving around a fallen tree and a young sapling fighting to grow between two boulders. Cottonpaw concentrated to feel out Pecanwhisker... a numb pain radiated off of her.

"Be careful, Acaciapaw. Something's wrong." He whispered to her, sending a feeling of caution to his charge. She slowed down as the feeling reached her, but she still carried herself with bravery.

"Pecanwhisker... Mother? What are you doing...?" Pecanwhisker looks back over her shoulder, startled at first. Then, with they soften to a lost, numb look.

The golden brown she-cat turned her attention back to the horizon. "I always tried to be brave for you and your brother... I always tried to be there for you. Through all of this." Pecanwhisker stood up,

turning to face her daughter. "But, look how grown up you are now. You've always been so brave, and you've gotten so strong. I don't think you and your brother need me anymore."

Acaciapaw blinked with disbelief. "What are you talking about?" She took a step forward, and realized how high up they were on the Bluff. Pecanwhisker moved a paw back, and loose grit clattered sharply down the cliff side.

"Your father moved on a long time ago. Before he told you he wasn't my mate anymore. Even before he told *me*, he had already moved on. And now... he's really, really moved on. I can't stand to see those kits," she shook her head with a cringe. "They make me feel so... empty. Worthless. My own mate didn't love me. My kits are too grown to want me. What's... what's left for me...?" In a way, Pecanwhisker wasn't even talking to her daughter anymore. It was as if the words that had been running through her head were finally slipping out without thought for who she was talking to. She turned away from Acaciapaw to look wistfully out into the sky. The sunlight had finally slipped away, and stars started to dot the sky. Wind whisked at the cliff face, stirring up the river to splash and spray. Acaciapaw's eyes grew wide.

"Pecanwhisker, what are you talking about...?! Even if Catalpapaw and I have gotten older, that doesn't mean we don't love you anymore!" Her fur bristled slightly, and Pecanwhisker seemed to have a flash in her eyes, but the warrior shook her head and pushed that away. A sudden pang of fear crept up inside Cottonpaw, and it wasn't coming from him. It was like a weed was choking out her once-endless bravery, and he felt those weeds strangling his own strength. Her thoughts were loud and clear to her guardian: *"I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say to save my mother. I don't know what to say, and I can't bare the effects of failing to help her. StarClan... Cottonkit. Help me, please...! I know you're there!"*

Cottonpaw took a step forward, forcing his way and snapping through the weeds inside of him that were strapping him down to his fears. He opened his mouth to speak, and in doing so he let his words flow into Acaciapaw. She echoed his every word out loud for her mother to hear, acting as a vessel for the StarClan apprentice. When his mouth opened, she breathed in as well, and when he

began to speak, the words left her tongue.

"Come back toward me, you have so much here in ZephyrClan waiting for you! Not just Catalpapaw and me, there's the whole Clan! You have so much life you have to live, so much to fight for. You can't give in; the will to protect is too strong within you, otherwise you wouldn't feel so defeated that Camphordwind is gone, and that we're growing up. Your will to protect is so strong, but you're missing the fact that there's still so much for you to love and protect. All of ZephyrClan is yours to love and protect. All of the current and future elders, the kits, the apprentices, warriors, everyone. We *all* need you." Cottonpaw stopped sending her the message, and Acaciapaw finished wholly on her own, "I need you. Come back to me, Mom!"

Pecanwhisker shuttered and let out a sob, taking steps forward toward her daughter and away from the cliff's edge. She crumpled to the ground as cried wracked through her body.

"I'm sorry, Acaciapaw. I'm so sorry...! You... you really have grown into such a brave warrior...!"

The two she-cats sat together as the moon rose. One cried quietly, and the other clenched her jaw to keep herself strong. Cottonpaw sat a distance from the two, taking the scene of mother and daughter in.

He helped save Pecanwhisker, and by doing so, saved Acaciapaw.

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an

A dark chapter, but this was always in the drafts to happen this way! When I plan a story, I will make notes chapter by chapter, and I actually wrote the entire confrontation scene out word for word back when I initially drafted this in February 2020.

(Serious personal note) — My own mom has struggled with depression (though she never attempted anything). When I was very young, it was hidden from me, but as I got older I began to sense a

dynamic similar to what I portrayed here: feeling like my presence or happiness could somehow fix things, or that growing up was making her sad. There's a lot more nuance to it in real life, but the connection between Acaciapaw and Pecanwhisker draws from my experience.

If you ever find yourself in a dark or dangerous headspace, please reach out for help. In the U.S., you can call or text 988 for the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline — it's free, confidential, and available 24/7. If you live outside the U.S., there are local helplines that can help too and are also free, private, and available 24/7. You're never alone in what you're feeling, and you're not alone in life. Talk to a friend, family member, teacher, or someone you trust. Someone cares about you, even if you don't think so.

Sorry for the long author's note, but this is such an important topic. Love you all, and take care of yourselves <3

twelve | rising tensions

[image]

twelve

rising tensions

Peace.

To Cottonpaw, peace felt like golden sunshine gently warming him on a cool day. It was sharing tongues was Hollydapple. It was

observing ripples chase one another across puddles on a rainy afternoon.

Cottonpaw lay beside Aldermist and let his peaceful thoughs spread from himself and shed onto her, like sunlight reaching through treetops to dapple the grass below. He hoped it was working— the gray tabby had her eyes closed as she basked in the Green Leaf sun. He could sense a calmness in her today, and with that, a purr rose in his throat.

Acaciapaw was across the camp sharing a hare with Pecanwhisker and Catalpapaw. The moon had grown from half full to nearly full since the night on the Bluff. Pecanwhisker was still off, but Cottonpaw hadn't felt that same feeling of hollowness and surrender from her that he had sensed before. Catalpapaw was silent but absorbed the conversation around him— something that was becoming more and more common for him. Acaciapaw talked about the latest fighting move she had been practicing with Camelliaheart, and how she was working on building muscle by climbing trees.

"Climbing trees? Don't get stuck in one," Pecanwhisker mused, to which Acaciapaw flicked her tail.

"I'd never!" Cottonpaw knew that was a lie. The first time she climbed one, she *had* gotten stuck. She froze on a birch's limb, and had begged Camelliaheart to climb up and carry her down. Camelliaheart denied her request flatly, and instead calmly instructed her on where to put her paws to get down.

Low conversation swayed through the camp with a hum. Sumackit, Apricotkit, and Auburnkit swat a moss ball around under the watchful eye of Honeywing. The trio were very nearly 6 moons, and would join the apprentices den any day... it would be *packed* in there.

Movement sounded at the camp entrance, and Cottonpaw lazily glanced up to see who was returning. He blinked in shock, jumping to his paws as the sun high patrol led by Blizzardstream crashed in. Blizzardstream was supported heavily by Balsamfur. At first, Cottonpaw thought the sun's warm rays were glowing against his

father's pelt, but then he realized the snowy fur really *was* red in several places— it wasn't an illusion from the sun. Camphorwind followed close behind with a new tear in his ear, and The nearly full-grown Poplarpaw was at his heels.

"Dad!" Cottonpaw gasped, rushing to his side. Aldermist had already bounded over to her mate, nosing him with fear-filled eyes. His stomach turned at the sight of the crimson, thick droplets spattered down onto the dusty packed earth below him. It was blood.

Smallbush, the deputy, tore away from where he shared tongues with Ryefoot to encounter the patrol.

"What's happened?! Catalpapaw, go fetch Fallowbark and Sequoiapaw!" He barked to the apprentice. His blue eyes were wide with surprise, but snapped a "yes, Smallbush!" and dashed to the medicine den. Acaciapaw left her mother's side to get in closer, her tail bristling. She eyed up her father with a look of resentment. Other clan cats gathered around, and Honeywing tried to usher her kits away without much success.

"CopseClan attacked our patrol," Camphorwind growled. "They were placing scent markers past the stream border all the way up to the tree line as a new border."

"What?! The stream has been the border since I was a kit! They'll gain several fox-lengths of *our* territory as theirs!" Smallbush hissed. The messy-furred black tom scowled in disbelief, and got closer to the patrol to sniff over his daughter, Balsamfur. "We'll need to wait for Aspenstar to return from hunting before we make any decisions," a sense of calmness returned to the undersized deputy, and he forced his fur flat. The crowd of bristling gathered cats parted for the two medicine cats as they made their way through. Sequoiapaw got to work right away assessing the injured, quickly landing on Blizzardstream as the highest priority. Cottonpaw stayed close to his father's side, and tried his best to hold his fear and unease back from impressing on any other cat, and the great white warrior was led away toward the medicine den.

"Stay here, Aldermist. I know you mean well, but you'll get in the way," the ginger tabby apprentice medicine cat stopped the queen

from following. Aldermist watched helplessly as her mate was led away, and a fellow she-cat gave her ear a comforting lick. A buzz of anger hummed in Cottonpaw's ear, originating from Acaciapaw. He ignored it, his eyes instead following his father be led away. *Please be okay, please be okay! Mother needs you here with her!*

"Blizzardstream is strong, a CopseClan skirmish won't bring him down," Smallbush meowed reassuringly to Aspenmist. A few meows of agreement echoed from the crowd, but none of the words *really* eased the anxiety clawing in Cottonpaw's stomach.

Acaciapaw took a step forward with bristling fur. "CopseClan has no right to take what's ours! They'll pay for what they've done...!" The chocolate point she-cat hissed, and agreeing yowls rose up from cats around her.

"Blizzardstream was protecting Poplarpaw... they attacked a patrol with an apprentice on it!" Balsamfur piped up. This caused more hissing of anger. Poplarpaw sheepishly glanced at the ground, not proud to have been the weakest link of the border patrol.

"All right, enough!" Smallbush turned with his tail lashing. "We'll wait for Aspenstar before we do anything. It's probably good to wait and think with clear minds, anyway. Everyone, back to whatever you were doing. Balsalmfur, Poplarpaw, and Camphorwind— report to the medicine den."

Cottonpaw turned and scampered into the medicine den, following the injured and leaving behind his charge. The storm of anger from her still raged in the back of his head, but he blocked it out as he head into the hollowed out hull of the great fallen tree. The medicine den was built into the hollow shell, with sweet smelling herbs growing around the woven brambles and grasses. His ears flattened as he heard hisses of pain from his father.

"Cottonpaw, wait," Pistachiopaw cut him off, startling him. "You've never seen blood, have you?" Fallowbark rushed right through the pair with a paw full of cobwebs. Cottonpaw swallowed nervously and shook his head.

"I-I don't want my dad to join us in StarClan yet," he confessed to

Pistachiopaw.

"It's okay, my charge is real good at what he does! Fallowbark is an amazing teacher, and an even better medicine cat. Blizzardstream will be okay." His friend moved close, pressing his side against Cottonpaw's. In the movement, he revealed the chaos of the two medicine cats working to clean and dress the wounds quickly.

The two worked in perfect rhythm. Fallowbark peeled cobwebs off of the white warrior, eyes full of concentration. "How's that horsetail poultice going?" Her voice was soft, but held a firmness to it. Sequoiapaw nodded in confirmation and spat out the chewed up green poultice, mixing in a dandelion's stem in with it. Cottonpaw edged closer, examining the medicine before looking over the damage to his father. Most of the cuts were small, but one large slice to his right flank made the young cat's stomach turn. He backed up, out of the way as Sequoiapaw moved up next to Blizzardstream's side.

"You're doing very well. Why don't you run the rest of triage? I'll stay to observe," Fallowbark nodded with approval as she spoke. The apprentice applied the poultice slowly with care to Blizzardstream while his mentor stood at his side with fresh cobwebs for him.

Pistachiopaw blinked with pleasant surprise and smiled. "A test for Sequoiapaw! Exciting! He totally's got this!"

"If you think I'm ready, I can. You'll call me out if I do anything wrong?" His mentor nodded in confirmation. "Alright, then... could you check on the incoming cats? For small cuts, prepare some marigold poultice. I can apply it once it's ready." Fallowbark dipped her head at his words, and head off to the three new cats who entered the den. The ginger tabby had a glow of pride as he commanded the medicine den.

Blizzardstream blinked through the pain and smiled at the young medicine-cat-in-training. "You're growing into a fine medicine cat. When do you think you'll earn your full title?" He winced as Sequoiapaw pressed a paw full of cobwebs to the largest cut on his right side, which was quickly secured by a few leaves of catchweed

which clung to both his long white fur and the cobweb.

"Hmm, it could be a while yet. My sister became a warrior four moons ago, but medicine cats train for a long time. It does kinda feel like she grew up faster than me, but I know it's safer for the clan if I take my time in learning everything from Fallowbark, rather than rushing through my apprenticeship," the tom worked on applying cobwebs to the smaller wounds.

"That's very wise. You really are growing in to a fine medicine cat." Cottonpaw sat close to his father's bedside again as the chaos of healing him slowed down. Blizzardstream looked out of the den and into the camp with a grimace. "The clan will need your skilled paws in the near future," he murmured. Acaciapaw was talking to Catalpapaw, and Cottonpaw could feel her aggression toward CopseClan. Cottonpaw felt a chill down his spine. There was no way he could ease her anger, and many other cats throughout the camp had a similar prickling static running through them. "There won't be any rest in the Clan until this dispute is settled properly. More blood is yet to be spilled."

A shiver ran down Cottonpaw's spine. The peaceful feelings he had spent his morning meditating on were now vanishing like mist in sunlight, replaced by the weight of something coming. Something much, much bigger.

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an

Here's some little Cottonpaw drawings I made :—))

thirteen | a proper meeting

thirteen
a proper meeting
_____

It had been several days since the border skirmish, and still a knot of worry worked at Cottonpaw. Night had set in, and the young tom continued to pace in a circled in the ZephyrClan camp. He cast a watchful eye over to the grassy apprentices den, which was quiet except for the soft snores and gentle breaths of the five apprentices. During the evening ritual of sharing tongues, Acaciapaw had brought up how she would claw up any CopseClan cat she crossed paths with, and that had started up Cottonpaw's worries and anxieties. What if the two clans went to war? There would be fighting, and more blood, and possibly even deaths. Acaciapaw could die, or severely injure another cat. *But she is a warrior in training— she's practicing every day to be a fighter. I'm silly to wish her to never lay a claw on another. Especially with how protective and fiery she is in nature. ...Does protecting your clan have to be so violent and so hateful, though?*

He continued to pace, his jaw clenching and unclenching. The easy breathing from the apprentice den suddenly had a whimper, and his

froze. It was Acaciapaw; he could feel a twitch in his paws that was coming from her. Bounding through the woven grass den, Cottonpaw stumbled upon the brown and cream she-cat sleep next to her brother. Her moss and feather nest had been displaced from her kicking her paws, and her eyes closed tightly in her sleep. She was having a nightmare— and he knew very well that his anxieties were causing it.

The starry tom settled down next to her, forcing his own breathing to slow down and regulate. *I caused her to have a bad dream! I can fix this— I just need to go into her dream, and then fix it. I need to calm down, first.* Cottonpaw continued to breathe slowly, deliberately, and deeply. He closed his eyes, and then slipped into her dream.

The dream was drained of color. Tree branches laced overhead like layered claw scratches, blanketing out any scraps of moonlight. Acaciapaw was pelting through the woods, and Cottonpaw raced behind her. Pain stung at their sides, but it wasn't pointy bushes catching their fur. Rather, claw marks were leaving the cuts from invisible cats in the shadows. The cats hissed and yowled as they struck out at her, filling the night with cries of battle calls. Her breath came out in quick gasps, panicked and afraid. He could feel her heart hammering in his own chest along with the heat of fear on her pelt.

Cottonpaw continued to steady his breathing, and slowed his running to a stop. "Acaciapaw, it's a dream. It's okay, you're safe! This is just a dream!" His voice sounded off like a bell, the echo ringing off the trees and bringing the caterwaul of fighting to a silence. She skid to a stop at the sound of his voice, and in slow motion turned to face him. The moment her sapphire gaze met his grassy one, the darkness lifted. Dapples of light leaked down, brightening the forest and chasing the shadows away. The invisible claws melted into nothingness, leaving the two apprentices alone in a softly lit glade.

"Hey, I remember you. Cottonkit!" She pad closer to get a better look at the white StarClan apprentice. "Hey, how come you never came back to visit my dreams until now? Oh— are you going to give me some spooky omen or something?"

Cottonpaw felt a purr rumble in his chest. She was really here with him... seeing him, interacting with him! His starry aura was touched with a bit of golden, joyful light. "No, no, I'm not that kind of StarClan cat. I mean, I guess I *could* deliver a prophecy, but I don't know anything about that kind of thing. And, actually, it's Cotton*paw* now."

"Well, Cotton*paw*, are you sure you don't have any prophecies or warnings? My Clan— our Clan— is probably going to be at war soon, so any information is important...!" She sniffed indignantly, and gave him an expectant look.

He blinked in surprise. "Have you always been this rude, and I never realized? Maybe it's because I've never been on the receiving end...."

"Hey, now *that's* rude!"

"Maybe Pistachiopaw is right, I have been coddling you...." He pad closer, and sniffed at her fur. It still held the breezy, flowery scent it did in the Below, but it had a sort of solid realness to it now that the two were fully and truly together.

"Coddling? Do you have fuzz in your brain? What does that mean?"

"Oh-- I'm sorry. I feel like you were starting to figure it out maybe, so it can't hurt to tell you," he paused and thought. *I actually don't know if I'll get in trouble if I tell her. I can't stand her not knowing... I spend every day with her and the other apprentices, but none of them have any idea. It's lonely... I really, really want to tell her, even if I'm not allowed to. If she knows... maybe I won't be so lonely.* "It's really *my* decision to tell you, anyway. I'm Cottonpaw, your protector from StarClan. I died as a kit, and I've been tasked to watch over you from that day forward. I've been with you since you were a moon old, following you around and pretending to play with you and the others. I've been with you at training, and there at Gatherings— well, the one and only that you were allowed to go to, at least."

Acaciapaw's eyes grew wide with shock, and then narrowed in thought. "You mean when I was attacked by a hawk as a kit... I almost died. I thought I saw a white kit..."

"That was me. I somehow got Blizzardstream to go outside, and he saved you."

"And when Pecanwhisker was going to... you gave me the words to say." She took a step closer.

"Yes."

"And every other time I was going to do something stupid, or I was feeling something so strongly..."

"Yes."

".... I don't know what to say.... Thank you?" Cottonpaw pawed forward. They were nose-to-nose.

"Oh, no need, no need. I just... I always saw us as friends or something. I'm just keeping my friend from getting hurt." She narrows her eyes and took a step back.

"Well, you don't always have to protect me. Scars look cool, y'know?" He purred, closing his eyes gently in laughter. Her narrowed eyes softened, and she smiled at him. "Seriously, though... thanks. Maybe... can you protect me if I have to fight CopseClan? — I'm not scared!" she added quickly. "But... I don't want to die on Pecanwhisker. My brother needs me too; he won't admit it though."

"I will. Always." It was a line she had said when she was first apprenticed, and it was line of confidence and bravery that he held close to his heart. He hoped it to become part of him.

Acaciapaw sat down, looking him up and down with an thankful look in her eye. It wasn't something he saw often from her— usually she had a look of defiance, of scrutiny, of confidence. For him, she was softened. It wasn't something he saw often from her.

"So you've been along with me this whole time, huh? What kind of powers do you have, exactly?"

"Well, mostly it's a lot of sending emotions to help balance someone, and send really subtle messages. And, I suppose, I can enter dreams like I am right now."

"... Wait, does that mean every time I randomly feel all anxious, that's you making me anxious?" She looked at him accusatorially.

Cottonpaw ducked his head sheepishly and waved his tail. "Sorry... yeah. It's an accident, I never *want* you to feel anxious. But really strong emotions just get passed between us. Every time you're angry, I always feel that from you. Even if I'm up in StarClan and not down in the Below with you, I can still always sense it; it's like burning but electric at the same time." That made her pause and think for a moment.

"You were really anxious today. And yesterday, too... are you worried about the stuff with CopseClan?" Cottonpaw nodded shyly. *I hope she doesn't think less of me for being anxious about it.*

"Yeah. I know if might seem kit-ish for me to be afraid of a battle, especially because you're so eager for it. I just don't like fighting and other cats getting hurt. Especially when those in the fight forget about the consequences of bloodshed. Cats get really hurt, some are lost and join me in StarClan. Families grieve needlessly." He thought about his mother's long grief for himself.

A familiar spark of a fire began to ignite in Acaciapaw. "CopseClan stole part of our territory— we need that land. It's Green Leaf now, but I remember back in Leaf Bare when I was a kit. We were *so* hungry for those few moons. That stretch of land, even if it isn't a lot, gives us so much more prey throughout the season. We need that bit of trees. But...," the fire in her died down with realization, "I suppose you're kinda right. I *am* excited to fight. I want to show how strong I've gotten in the last four moons of training. I didn't think about how it affects others, I was more worried about the glory of it all."

"It's okay, Acacia. You're right, this fight isn't meaningless. I can't forget that. When you do go into battle, I'll be there with you. But don't forget those cats you fight are real cats with friends, kits, parents, and dreams." The light in the forest was beginning to brighten as the daylight of the real world poured into the sleeping Acaciapaw's eyes. She was starting to wake up. He stepped forward and touched his pink nose to her own coal-dark one. "I'll be with you."

The dream became overwhelmingly bright, to where he couldn't see anything anymore. The dream rippled away into emptiness. Cottonpaw closed his eyes, opened them again, and was laying invisibly next to Acaciapaw. The she-cat opened her eyes sleepily. She startled, jumping to her paws. She glanced around, searching for something. He knew she was looking for him.

"Good morning! You must've had quite the dream." Poplarpaw murmured from across the den. The gray tabby's sister, Peonypaw, was grooming his fur before they had to head out for the day's training, and she paused to give Acaciapaw a worried look.

The chocolate and cream she-cat sat back down uneasily, and gave a small nod. "Yeah... it was."

//
an

I've been WAITING for this chapter for foreverrrr like when I started this fic I was excited for this scene to happen.

Last chapter I gave you all a Cottonpaw drawing in my AN, nowwwww here's an Acaciapaw! This is a treat for reading this far, for all the love & support! Hope you enjoy her :—)

[image]

fourteen | before the storm

fourteen

before the storm

"Peonypaw, make sure you're staying close to Catalpapaw in battle. Don't lose sight of each other, and have each other's backs. Sagepaw and Poplarpaw will stick together too."

The sun beat down on the training hollow encircled by shrubs and a few trees on the ZephyrClan plains. All of the apprentices were gathered, along with their mentors, including the three new additions: Sumacpaw, Apricotpaw, and Auburnpaw. Today was their third day being apprentices, and they could barely sit still for Camphorwind to get through the overview for the day.

"What about us, Camphorwind!" Sumacpaw bounced on his toes, the red tabby's eyes glowing with eagerness. Acaciapaw snorted a laugh, and the kit-fluffed tom looked away with embarrassment.

"You three won't be fighting," Camelliaheart meowed and shot a glare to his apprentice. Acaciapaw met his gaze before glancing down at her paws with respect.

"Wait, what about Acaciapaw, Camphorwind? You said Peonypaw

and Catalpapaw are partners, and Sagepaw and Poplarpaw are partners!" Apricotpaw squeaked.

Acaciapaw met her estranged father's gaze with a narrowing to her eyes. "There's an odd number of apprentices," Acaciapaw answered the young cream and white she-kit, deciding to take a kinder approach than scoffing at the youngest addition's comments like she had for Sumacpaw. "But don't worry— I won't be on my own."

Acaciapaw's thoughts over the past three days had been preoccupied with her dream of the white StarClan protector. She hadn't seen him in another dream since then, but she had felt his presence. When she really, *really* concentrated at just the right moment... she could feel him. It made her fur prickle and chill, yet her mind would clear and relax. She couldn't tell exactly where he was, but she could tell he was nearby. One time yesterday during training, though, she felt his worries and anxieties crumple in her stomach and she *knew* it was from him.

Even now, in the training hollow, she could tell he was around.

"She means Camelliaheart has her back!" Sumacpaw meowed smartly, closing his eyes with pride.

Apricotpaw shook her head. "No, have you got catchweed in your brain? She means she's got the rest of the warriors to watch her back!"

Catalpapaw sighed deeply, looking toward the collection of mentors to rescue him from the conversation. Acaciapaw gave him a light shove playfully.

"We used to be like that," she murmured to him, and her brother rolled his sapphire eyes. A glimmer of humor was held in them.

"'Used to?' You act like that was a lifetime ago— that was us four moons ago. And... you still like to argue with Poplarpaw like that." The gray tabby in question was trying to look stoic and detached. That was his new thing— trying to impress the warriors and look more ready for his warrior title. It made Acaciapaw even more annoyed with him. *He's not really like that, he's actually annoying and*

always picking on me!

"Alright, alright, enough," Camphorwind growled. Poplarpaw shot a glare to Auburnpaw to back up his mentor's command. The two apprentices sat up sharply in line. The other mentors— Peachhop being Catalpapaw's, Bluefall being Peonypaw's, Roseslip being Sagepaw's, Ryefoot being Sumacpaw's, Pochardpound being Auburnpaw's, and Blizzardstream being Apricotpaw's— broke up from where they had been gathered off to the side discussing the plans for training for the day.

Blizzardstream stepped forward. "We're all going to do some battle training until sunhigh. Auburnpaw, Apricotpaw, and Sumacpaw, our newest additions, we'll be training together for some fighting basics... you won't be in the battle with CopseClan, but ZephyrClan will need you to defend the camp."

Ryefoot, Blizzardstream, and Pochardpounce led their respective young apprentices off to one side of the hollow to begin training. The three kits tore off ahead of their mentors with glee. Camphorwind flicked his tail with a sigh. Acaciapaw felt a heat of anger burn in her fur. *He's so dismissive of them because they act young still. Maybe that's why he didn't want me and Catalpapaw anymore. I wonder how he's going to feel once Vervainkit and Orchidkit are old enough to walk, talk, and play. Maybe he'll move on from Hemlockwish....* Acaciapaw wasn't sure if that thought brought her joy, or more anger with her father.

"Acaciapaw...? Acaciapaw!" She was snapped out of her thoughts by Camphorwind's sharp words. He hadn't really addressed her much since the conversation where he cut her off, if anything it had felt like he did everything to avoid having to talk to her specifically. "Get your mind out of the clouds. We're getting into practice spars— do you even want to be part of this fight with CopseClan?" His face was unreadable. She glared back at him.

"Is that even a question? Of course."

"Then act like it and don't drift off like that. I have half a mind to put you in camp with those three kits," he referenced the trio of new apprentices. Acaciapaw clenched her jaw, fighting to keep her

tongue in check. Just as she felt herself start to give into a sharp retort, a cold prickle washed over her, a clarity like wind through open green grassy fields washed over her. Just as soon as she felt it, it washed away. She blinked away the sharpness, and whisked around to where Catalpapaw was moving to get ready to spar with Sagepaw. She dug her claws into the earth with each step, her jaw still working at clenching and unclenching as she moved away. If Camphorwind thought she wasn't ready, she'd show him.

"Hey, don't worry about all that. I wouldn't let him pull you out of the battle, he doesn't have enough sway in the Clan to do that," she blinked and looked up as she was joined by Camelliaheart. The white and ginger tom was like an owl with how silent he could be sometimes. Acaciapaw flicked her ear in a silent thanks. "Forget about Camphorwind. I want to see you practice diving into an active battle to get a Clanmate out of a tricky spot..."

They went on training until the sun hung high above their heads, casting a merciless afternoon heat. Acaciapaw and Poplarpaw sparred under the watchful eye of their mentors and the other apprentices. Acaciapaw pushed off of Poplarpaw with her hind paws, sending him skittering away, and she rolled up to her four paws with a pant of exertion. The gray tabby dug his claws into the earth, shaking off the hit and barreling back into the fiery she-cat. Poplarpaw was full grown by now, and his weight knocked into her shoulder like a boulder. The ground disappeared from below her paws, and for a heartbeat she was flying. She landed on her side, Poplarpaw on top of her. Before she could react, he pushed his paw on her chest, pinning her to the ground gently but signaling the end of the fight. He had won.

Camphorwind raised his tail, and called off the fight. Dust clung to Acaciapaw's fur as she got to her paws, and blinking in surprise as Poplarpaw touched his tail to her shoulder.

"You okay?" He looked to the shoulder he had headbutt moments previously. She gave a stiff nod, and he turned without another word and made his way over to his mentor's side to debrief on the fight.

Acaciapaw turned to plop down beneath a patch of shade. Her thick

pelt was hot and her chest heaved as she caught her breath. Squeaks of excitement faded as the three younger apprentices were been led out of the hollow and back toward camp by their mentors at the closing of the battle. Camphorwind quietly conversed with Poplarpaw. The apprentice's green eyes glanced back at her briefly before returning sharply to his mentor.

"Nice fight with Poplarpaw." Dry grass crunched at the approach of Camelliaheart.

"I lost," she grumbled without looking at him. He sat down and twitched an ear.

"Yeah, but you've been sparring all morning. It's a good test of endurance. You're going to need that stamina for tomorrow."

She narrowed her eyes, a spark of determination lighting in her stomach, and she forgot about the exhaustion that weighed her paws down.

Camphorwind finished his conversation with Poplarpaw, and turned to face the other training cats, raising his tail.

"Alright, everyone. We're heading back to camp to rest for the rest of the day. Be sure to eat a good meal. You'll need the energy for the battle. We leave just before dawn."

Catalpapaw stayed by Acaciapaw's side as they hiked through the fields back to camp. Their father stalked just ahead of them, silent except for the grasses whispering past his broad shoulders. A scowl crossed her face as she watched him walk, and she sped her pace up to push past him. She glared a piercing look back to the gray tabby point. Her heart dropped as she was met with gleam of pain. He blinked it away just as quickly as she noticed it, returning to his typical cold, nonchalant expression. She turned her eyes forward.

"Wait up...!" Catalpapaw trot a few steps to keep up. She twitched her tail apologetically, but as they finished the journey back home her mind wouldn't stop running. Annoyance burned hot in her ears. *I have every right to be angry with him. He can't be upset that I'm angry with him, there's no reason for him to be upset!*

Her fur prickled and a chill ran down her spine. She looked to her left and right, but she couldn't see any ghost of a certain white starry cat. A clarity washed over her, cooling down the fire and warmth growing hot under her skin. *Or* can *Camphorwind be sad? Should I have any say?*

The wind stirred, rustling the field and carrying a long-familiar scent: a mix of stars, frost, and refreshing green grass. A sense of calm came with it.

Today, she would rest and recover. Tomorrow, she'd fight in her first battle. *StarClan, Cottonpaw... keep me safe. Keep Catalpapaw safe. And... I never thought I'd ask it, but... keep Camphorwind safe, too.*

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an

So yes! Now that Cottonpaw and Acaciapaw have fully met, the point of view will move between the two from chapter to chapter.

. I hoooooppe all of the apprentices aren't too confusing. As a quick mini allegiances,

Poplarpaw, Peonypaw, and Sagepaw are all siblings who are 11 almost 12 moons old. They are all Agaveshade's kits.

Acaciapaw and Catalpapaw are 9 almost 10 moons old. Acaciapaw's mentor is Camelliaheart, and Catalpapaw's is Peachhop.

New additions to the apprentice den (happened between last chapter and this one) are Honeywing's kits: Sumacpaw, Auburnpaw, and Apricotpaw. They're all 6 moons.

And that's all! 8 apprentices! I know, a lot, but the oldest trio will be warriors soooooonish so it'll start clearing up!